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## **THE CHILDREN, YES!**

# **INVOLVING CHILDREN IN OUR CONGREGATION'S WORSHIP**

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## INTRODUCTION

On June 27, 1980, *The Texas Methodist/United Methodist Reporter*, the most widely circulated religious weekly in the world, published a brief, satirical article criticizing the use of children's sermons.<sup>1</sup> The article contended that the children's sermon was essentially a gimmick which exploited the children and interrupted the worship service.

The reader response in the following four weeks objecting to the views stated in the article was overwhelming; so overwhelming, in fact, that in the July 25 issue the entire editorial page was devoted to the subject of the children's sermon. In the editorial of that issue the editor states:

Due to both the substance and the satirical style of the original article, we expected to receive a large number of responses. We were surprised, however, by the overwhelming volume of responses we received from pastors and lay persons across the United States—the vast majority of which affirm directing a special part of the church's worship to the interests of children. We have, in fact, received more letters from readers regarding this subject than any other issue dealt with this year, including the 1980 General Conference.<sup>2</sup>

I called and spoke personally with the editor of the TM/UMR, Spurgeon M. Dunnam III. I asked him more specifically how the response to the article criticizing the children's sermon compared with other controversial topics. His response was that a particularly "hot issue" might elicit several dozen letters. The response to the children's sermon was 400-500 letters! Dr. Dunnam went on to say that even those relatively few readers who wrote to say they were also opposed to the use of the "children's sermon" were at the same time in favor of including a place for the children in worship. I asked Dr. Dunnam if he had come to any conclusions as a result of the experience. He referred me to

the July 25 editorial in which he analyzed the pattern of common thought in the majority of the letters and stated, "I know one thing, if I were the pastor of a local church, I would look for ways to involve children in worship!"

Dr. Dunnam's analysis of the readers' response is summarized as follows: There is a consensus among readers that: (1) Though Jesus specifically declared the importance of children in the kingdom, the typical worship service does little to include children; (2) offering a "children's sermon" is one way of including children in worship; (3) if a children's sermon is offered, it should be structured as an integral part of the service; (4) the same thoughtful preparation should be made for children's sermons as for "adult" sermons; (5) the children's sermon should never be used as a ploy for relaying messages to adults who overhear; (6) if a children's sermon is not offered, other alternatives should be explored.

For me, the *Texas Methodist/United Methodist Reporter* experience confirmed an earlier suspicion formulated unconsciously several years ago: that there is a broad interest among clergy and lay persons all across the country in making the church's worship relevant to children, a concern to find the proper means by which the Word can be proclaimed and the worship appropriated directly to the children.

### *A Personal Struggle*

My hunch that the concern for children in worship was widespread began as the result of a personal struggle I faced as the pastor of a local church. I began my ministry in The United Methodist Church in June 1971. I was appointed pastor of a student charge in a small rural community in North Texas. I was the typical student pastor: delving deep into the broad theological issues at the seminary during the week, seeking to make sense of them in sound biblical preaching on Sunday. And I didn't do so badly at that! Yet, within a short time, I intuitively sensed a gulf between the church's worship (including my sermons) and the children's interests, comprehension, and perception.

The thought process of the average worship service was too abstract. The language was too complex. The relation of philo-

sophical truth, biblical exegesis, and contemporary life situation was too vague and far removed. The adults patiently strained to follow the logic and make the necessary associations between the symbol and real life. The children merely went to sleep, fussed and squirmed, or bided their time with a crayon and a bulletin cover or two! I knew something was wrong. Something was lacking. Puzzle pieces were missing. But what? What were the children trying to tell me and the rest of the church?

My sensitivity to the children increased dramatically with the birth of our first child. I found myself sitting for hours on end observing the child's behavior, interacting with him, and noting with amazement the astonishing transformation of his growth from an infant to a toddler. At first I tried to make him understand my language, my thoughts, my ways. There was so much I wanted to give, to impart, to teach. I soon learned instead to receive, to allow the child to express himself. As I did, I was able to discover some of the secrets of his language, his form of logic, the shape of his world coherence. I came to realize that we lived in two different worlds, this child and I. Yet I found that there could be a bridge between us, allowing free passage of communication and relationship—if I would allow it.

The subsequent births of our second and third children, the opportunities to interact directly with children in the church program, the freedom to experiment with sermon delivery and worship planning all contributed to the gradual surfacing of this hunch that had laid dormant for so long: that children are a vital part of the church for whom the worship service can be rich and meaningful, and that the adults—parents and friends—want so much for the children to be included.

It was this hunch that led me back to the seminary for more study. It was this hunch that quickly rose to the surface and found expression and support in the hundreds of letters to the editor of the TM/UMR from all across the country voicing the opinion that the nature of the church is inclusive of children and the worship of the church—its Word, Sacraments, and liturgy—must reflect that nature.

I said earlier that I intuitively sensed a gulf between the church's worship and the children's interests, comprehension, and perception. I should go on to say that the gulf was felt in four distinct areas of ministry: preaching, Holy Communion, teaching, and the liturgy. With regard to each I faced (as I soon discovered many other ministers also faced) what I took to be serious questions of theology and ecclesiology.

### *Preaching*

Take, first, the area of preaching. As I noted, it is obvious that most "adult" sermons are far too abstract and complex in logic and vocabulary to be readily comprehended by the children. This is not to say that most sermons are inadequately prepared or poorly delivered. It is, rather, to say that the manner in which adults reason and communicate with each other is decidedly different from the manner in which adults communicate with children and the manner in which children communicate with each other. There is a fundamental difference! At the time, I sensed the difference, but not having the discoveries of developmental psychology at my grasp and lacking a sufficient backlog of personal experience, I could not articulate what the difference was.

By no means is this to suggest that this difference between adult and child perception had never been noticed, had never been studied, and had never been bridged. Every competent kindergarten or preschool teacher has instinctively unlocked the secret. But that secret had been left in the Sunday school room. It was missing in the worship experience, and particularly, it was missing in preaching.

But even if I could have fully understood the problem of perception and communication and found ways to bridge the gap in preaching, there was a further, more fundamental obstacle: sermons addressed to adults deal with issues typical of adult life. Occupational hazards, marital difficulties, parenting, sexuality, etc., are of crucial importance to adults, but are totally irrelevant to children. Repeatedly, I found myself asking the question, Is there a Word from the Lord for these little ones? Is the Good News for them? If so, must I not find ways both to communicate on their level and to address myself to their particular questions and their particular needs? But on what grounds and by whose authority shall I act to alter the worship service so as to include a special time or special sermon for them?

### *Holy Communion*

Then there came the question of the children at the Lord's Table. The children, for the most part, came with their parents.

They knelt at the Communion rail as a family. The children were obviously not confirmed in the faith. Some were not even baptized.

I pondered the question over and over: Should the children be included in Communion? Why or why not? And aside from the criteria of baptism and confirmation, I wondered in more elementary fashion, is there a minimum age to the sacrament, a minimal understanding essential to receiving the loaf and cup? Instinctively, I found myself serving the elements to the children and blessing their presence at the Lord's Table, but I felt a great sense of discomfort and uncertainty in doing so, and I was thankful that at the time I was never asked to defend my actions.

### *Teaching and Learning*

Then there was the question of how children learn. As a minister in The United Methodist Church I took seriously Wesley's admonition to "teach the children."<sup>3</sup> But I reasoned that this admonition applied to more than simply the Sunday school program. After all, the Sunday school program is a fairly recent innovation to the Christian tradition.<sup>4</sup> And besides, how could I or anyone else teach the children about the faith if they were forbidden, explicitly or by default, to participate in its most central activity, worship?

I had already learned from my observations of children and from my own childhood recollections that children learn not by being told, but by doing. I felt keenly that if the children were to learn about the faith, they needed to be involved in every aspect of the church's worship: its hymns, its prayers, its acts of praise, its proclamation of the Word.

### *Liturgy*

This led me to a critical assessment of the church's worship, and in particular, its liturgy. For if it is true, as I firmly believe it is, that we learn through liturgy,<sup>5</sup> what are we learning Sunday after Sunday in the present-day church? And what message is conveyed through the liturgy to the children in our congregations?

I looked carefully at the content of our liturgy, and I found archaic terms and expressions, sophisticated theological language, and highly abstract symbolism. To illustrate my point by exaggeration, I wondered how the average "tempest tossed seamen" would be able to existentialize and appropriate the Atone-

ment of Him who is the expiation of their sins while striving to remain afloat on the raging sea of life!

I looked also to the style of our liturgy, and I found it heavily weighted toward the cognitive, and mostly verbal—a series of monologues with an occasional hymn or responsive reading thrown in. I couldn't help but compare the vitality of the adult fellowship time before the service with the lethargy during the church hour. And especially could I not miss noticing the contrast between the children on the playground and the children in the sanctuary.

I wondered, is there not some way to create liturgy which is true to the faith, pleasing to God, and expressive of the total congregation? In an attempt to find the balance, I found myself experimenting with acts of praise that called for the congregation to act, to move about, to enter into dialogue, to relate to each other, to experience and express the faith in ways other than recitation. I called upon children to read the scripture and to serve as liturgists and adults to sing children's songs. I found myself telling more stories and using contemporary literature to augment the traditional liturgy and scripture readings.

One of my memorable experiences happened in a worship service in which a ten-year-old boy was asked to read the scripture lesson. The particular lad who was asked to read was an athletic type young man, of stocky build, with a husky voice, dressed more for action than appearance. When it came time for him to read, he walked briskly to the front, swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and read the entire lesson, not only without flaw, but with a simple sincere expression that conveyed respect for the scripture and faith in God. The congregation was spellbound and listened in awe. When he returned to his seat, tears filled every eye, and I knew as I approached the pulpit that the Word of God had already been proclaimed!

The euphoria of my early experimentation was quickly tempered, however, with another incident. On a long car trip to grandma's house for the holidays, my wife and I were pressed to find ways to alleviate the weariness and boredom of our three small children. Donna took it upon herself to lead the family in singing. But instead of calling the tunes, she asked each child to name a favorite song for us all to sing together. The oldest, then five, wanted to sing the song, "Indians in the Forest." We all joined in. Then the youngest, not quite two at the time, came up with another Native American song called, "Hi, yi, yi, yi." Again, we all sang.

Then it was our middle son's turn. He was three at the time. I fully anticipated a similar selection. After all, children prefer "children's songs," don't they? He boldly announced that his favorite song was, "Holy, Holy, Holy," and before we could regain our composure he proceeded to sing the entire first verse without missing a note or word! My whole theory of relating to children "on their level" blew out the open window, and I realized that allowing children to be active in much of our forms and rituals can be very acceptable for children. But a certain degree of innovation and a great deal of intentionality is essential.

Now, I fully admit, it is no innovation to employ children or use stories in worship. We've been doing that off and on for years. And I doubt that there is any objection to this, though there is criticism of the use of children's songs and physical activity by the congregation. My question, though, concerning liturgy runs deeper than these "devices."

What I finally came to ask is this: Is there a proper way to worship? That is, by what standards are some forms of worship deemed acceptable and others unacceptable? Is logical progression and continuity our utmost concern? What constitutes a disruption in worship? How much freedom should a pastor or worship committee have in planning the liturgy?

In an effort to bridge the gap between adults and children I found that many innovations were seen as refreshing to the adults, though others proved offensive. Almost all the efforts received positive support from the children. They were eager to do more and be more a part of the worship service. As a result, the number of children grew, but with the increase in numbers and innovation came growing complaints from the adults that the service lacked sufficient formality and order. Modifications were made. Moderation became the watchword. But through it all, I sensed the absence of precedent and a void in our historical tradition. Who was I to tamper with the church's worship?

### *Hypothesis*

This has been my personal struggle in trying to take seriously the place and role of children in worship. And, as I have indicated, my hunch has been confirmed that I am not alone in the struggle. What I have come to believe, however, is that the question as to the place and role of children in worship is far more profound than I first imagined, much deeper than whether or not to have a children's sermon.

What I have discovered is that once the church openly recognizes the presence of children and seeks to afford them a place of belonging and participation in worship it encounters a much more searching issue: What is the nature of the church? At the core of this issue is nothing less than our understanding of grace and covenant upon which the entire faith depends. For with the presence of children comes the inclusive nature of the church, a community of faith in which one is accepted and affirmed unconditionally, without regard to righteousness, understanding, or merit.

This inclusive nature of the church becomes then the hypothesis which gives the struggle direction and sets us on a journey to discover first whether indeed children do have a place and role in the church's worship, and if they do, how we as ministers, teachers, parents, and friends can effectively proclaim the Word of God to them.

#### NOTES

1. *The Texas Methodist/United Methodist Reporter*, Vol. 127, No. 2, June 27, 1980.
2. *The Texas Methodist/United Methodist Reporter*, Vol. 127, No. 6, July 25, 1980.
3. *The Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1964), p. 49.
4. Robert W. Lynn and Elliot Wright, *The Big Little School* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
5. Gwen Kennedy Neville and John H. Westerhoff, III, *Learning through Liturgy* (New York: Seabury, 1978).

## A BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

What is the place of children in the faith community, and what should be their role in the church's worship? This is our concern. And because the Bible is normative for the church's faith and practice, it is essential that we look first to the scripture and determine as best we can the place and role of children in the canon.

### *Method*

In doing this, though, certain ground rules are in order. The first has to do with our approach to scripture. We must begin with a basic understanding of the nature of the canon itself. It should go without saying that the canon consists of many books, composed by many authors, editors, and redactors, reflecting many widely divergent sets of interests, biases, and backgrounds, written and compiled over many long and dynamic periods of time. Thus, we should use extreme caution in connecting varied samplings of scripture, determining common themes, or drawing ultimate conclusions.

The second ground rule has to do with our topical concern. Obviously, the question of the place and role of children in the faith community is not the primary concern of the scriptures. We seek information and relevance from scriptural passages for an issue related only indirectly or not at all to the actual subject of the text. And our experience with topical studies generally has been that what the Bible says regarding any topic is usually subject to wide differences and debate. We must not expect the subject of children to be any different. Thus, whatever references we find in the canon to children in the life of the Old or New Israel should be taken as witness and not proof, with whatever inferences we make suggestive, not authoritative.

And the third ground rule is that of biblical exegesis. Proper biblical exegesis strives to extract the meaning from the text. No prior assumptions are made. No prior agenda is offered. Our method is not biblical exegesis (though we are not unconcerned about the meaning of the text). Rather, our method is that of a survey. In some cases the evidence may be contained in what the text says, in others it may be contained more in what the text does not say, but implies.

With these ground rules clearly before us, taking extreme caution not to misappropriate the sacred writings, we are now prepared to embark upon a fascinating journey which will take us through the centuries of a faith pilgrimage, from Creation to Revelation, through periods of peace and war, in homeland and exile, involving promise and fulfillment. And throughout the journey our attention will be focused upon the children in our midst.

### *Receiving the Covenant: The Pentateuch*

The faith pilgrimage begins with what shall become a recurring theme throughout the canon: covenant. Though implicit in the creation narratives (Genesis 1, 2) and in God's relation to Adam and Eve and their children (Genesis 2-4), the first explicit reference of covenant is when God says to Noah through the words of the Yahwist:

"I will establish my covenant with . . . you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation" (Gen. 6:18, 7:1; see also, 9:8).

The place of children in the covenant is understood, for God's choosing is of a whole family through a righteous individual. As in the case of Abram, God promises:

"I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations . . ." (Gen. 17:7).

The seal prescribed of this covenant is circumcision, to be performed on every male on the eighth day of life (Gen. 17:10-12). It is this basic understanding of God's relation to humankind that finds expression throughout the Old and New Testaments, and thus informs the faith community's understanding of itself in relation to God.

The implications of this covenant for understanding the place of children in the faith community are many. For one, it is clear that children are a part of the family. As such they are a part of every major experience of the family. They are present in the slave camps of Egypt (Exod. 10:10), the Exodus (Exod. 12:37), the Wilderness (Exod. 17:3), the Promised Land (Deut. 31:12). And within these major events children are obviously (and sometimes explicitly stated) a part of the community's life, for good and ill.

For instance, when in Egypt the Pharaoh seeks to subjugate the Israelites for their insubordination, it is the firstborn male child he seeks to kill (Exod. 1:15ff). In the wilderness children experience with their parents the pangs of hunger and thirst (Exod. 17:3), as well as receive the satisfaction of being nourished with manna from heaven and water from the rock. When in anger God denounces his people for their apostasy, it is to the children he turns with the promise of entry into Canaan (Num. 14:29-31).

And central to the faith community's relation to God is its worship. Throughout the wilderness journey we find Moses calling the people to gather for worship. The presence of children within these gatherings is always implicit, and on rare occasions, explicit. To cite only a few examples, we find texts which read:

"All the people would rise up and worship" (Exod. 33:10); "Moses assembled all the congregation of the people of Israel" (Exod. 35:1); "When both (trumpets) are blown, all the congregation shall gather . . . at the entrance of the tent of meeting" (Num. 10:3); "Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones . . . that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God. . . . Then Moses spoke the words of this song . . . in the ears of all the assembly of Israel" (Deut. 31:12-30).

The rituals of worship in the early life of this covenanted community are at first maintained by the ordination of every firstborn male (Num. 3). Later, the tribes are organized, and the tribe of Levi is assigned the priestly function. In both cases, not only the presence of children in worship is suggested, but also the role of children in the maintenance of worship is implied, especially as we read,

"According to the number of all the males, from a month old and upward, there were eight thousand six hundred, attending to the duties of the sanctuary" (Num. 3:28).

In pointing out the active place children occupied in the faith community, we must be careful not to glorify the role of the child. For if children (at least males!) were a blessing for the ancient Hebrews and a hope for continuation of life and faith, they were also counted as part of a man's possessions. Thus we see that children are often grouped with the larger list of property including the women, household goods, sojourners, and cattle (e.g., Deut. 3:19, 29:11). When evaluating the worth of an individual, the Leviticus code specifies that an adult is worth fifty shekels of silver, whereas a male child under five years old is worth only five (Lev. 27:3-6)!

Regarding children, primary emphasis is placed upon their care and education. The Yahwist stories in Genesis, for example, are generally accepted as "aetiological narratives," serving the purpose of conveying the nature of life and faith to the young (cf. Gen. 2:24). There is the clear expectation that, having participated in the corporate life and worship of the faith community, children would naturally seek understanding and ask questions. Thus, we read:

"When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies?' . . . you shall say . . ." (Deut. 6:20; see also Exod. 13:14).

And there is the constant admonition to pass on the faith from generation to generation, "that (the children) may learn to fear (God) all the days that they live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children so" (Deut. 4:10).



### *Establishing the Nation: Joshua through Kings*

This much is clear: if God gave Canaan to his chosen people, Israel, he included in the bargain a number of obstacles, not the least of which was the presence of powerful and hostile enemies. Thus, the early years of life in the promised land are years of constant battles and hardship. In this period the role of children is even more obscure than in the Pentateuch, for warfare is obviously the task of the adult male.

A basic understanding of the nature of nomadic people, however, illuminates our concept of the faith community during these turbulent years. Living in tents without the advantage of fortified (walled) cities, the Israelite camps would have been located in close proximity to the battleground. As a general rule, the warring men would fight during the day and return to their camps at night. To leave the women and children unprotected for any great length of time or at any great distance would have been unthinkable. Thus, we can speculate that, though not always mentioned, the presence of women and children is understood in the numerous gatherings of the people of Israel during this period. Especially at moments of worship we can assume the presence of all ages, just as we find explicit reference to an early occasion for worship in Canaan:

"There was not a word . . . which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them" (Joshua 8:35).

But if the early years across the Jordan were preoccupied with wars, they were also concerned with the procuring of right leadership. In some instances this leadership seems to have included children and/or youth: For example, the choosing of Gideon, his sons, and his grandsons (Judges 8:22); the "young priest" of Micah who became to Micah like "one of his sons" (Judges 17:17); Samuel, "a boy girded with a linen ephod" (1 Sam. 2:18); David, who was "but a youth" (1 Sam. 16:11; 2 Sam. 5:4); Manasseh, who began his reign at age twelve (2 Kings 21:1); Josiah, who reigned at eight years old (2 Kings 22:1). Of course, one only has to recall the foreordination of Jacob as the child of the promise, chosen even before birth (Gen. 25:23), to be reminded that the election of God has no regard for age, ability, or righteous action. In this light we later read of Solomon's metaphorical confession,

"I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in" (1 Kings 3:7),

and we remember the dependent nature of creature to Creator. This fundamental nature of dependency gives rise to a more general understanding that, regardless of age, we are all essentially children in God's sight.

## *Experiencing Triumph and Tragedy: Chronicles through Ecclesiastes*

Once Israel is firmly established in the land of Canaan and finds security in the protection of fortified cities, the task of governing the people justly and building a temple suitable for Yahweh becomes paramount. Israel, under the leadership of David and later, Solomon, enjoys a long period of peace and prosperity. After the temple is complete, the wall encircling Jerusalem restored, there arises conflict within the community which ultimately brings about chaos, collapse, and exile.

We assume the role of children during these years continued as before, children being present in the total life of Israel, learning the faith from their parents by participating, observing, and questioning. As we have seen before, there continue to be many references to the community gathered for worship, and occasionally the presence of children is specified; for instance, we read:

“Praise the Lord. . . . Young men and maidens together, old men and children! Let them praise the name of the Lord” (Ps. 148:1, 12-13).

(See also, 2 Chron. 20:5, 31:18; Ezra 10:1; Neh. 12:43). In the other references to the community gathered for worship, the presence of children is implied.

An interesting discovery is a reference of Nehemiah to conscious understanding as a norm for worship. The text reads:

“And all the people gathered as one man into the square . . . and Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding” (Neh. 8:1-2; also 9:38).

Just what Nehemiah means by “all who could hear with understanding” is unclear. That he intends this as a requirement for inclusion in the worshiping community is doubtful, however, for later he explicitly mentions the children’s presence at the service of the dedication for the restored wall of Jerusalem (12:43). The

question of the relation of knowledge to grace is an important one, however, and we might well ask, what constitutes a minimal knowledge of salvation? As we have seen, the Israelites placed high importance on conveying the faith to their young. And we find the book of Proverbs to be almost exclusively concerned with the imparting of right wisdom (Prov. 1:2).

But what we must understand is that nowhere in the canon is grace contingent upon knowledge. On the contrary, knowledge is understood as a natural outgrowth of prevenient grace. For example, Proverbs assumes that the covenant of God will continue through the children, and accordingly is concerned only that the faith continue rightly. As we have seen, God's election of Jacob had nothing to do with Jacob's knowing or choosing God. Likewise, God's grace is illustrated in the promise that

"Your children, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall go in (to the Promised Land), and to them I will give it, and they shall possess it" (Deut. 1:39).

### *Living in Exile: The Prophets*

For the most part the prophets share a common concern: calling to account Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh and admonishing the people of Israel to repent.

The prophets address themselves largely to those who either have experienced or who are presently experiencing persecution, oppression, and exile. In this sense, the prophetic words of judgment serve to explain Israel's suffering (Jer. 6:11) and give hope to its future redemption (Jer. 31:17).

In the context of the prophets, the role of children is primarily restricted to that of blessing and covenant. Children are slain (Jer. 49:10), taken from their parents (Jer. 44:7), and driven into exile (Jer. 22:28) as one means of purging Israel for her sin. In the sense of covenant, children (as before) occupy a place in the faith community and, as such, reap the fruits of their fathers' righteousness and suffer the consequences of their fathers' sin (Jer. 2:30).

There is, in the prophets, especially Isaiah and Hosea, the image of the child used metaphorically to describe the model of humankind in relation to Yahweh. When we read God's promise of restoration and redemption expressed poetically, that

"a young woman shall conceive and bear a son" (Isa. 7:14) . . . "for to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder" (Isa. 9:6) . . . "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb . . . and a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11:6),

it is to say prophetically that the salvation of Israel rests solely upon the righteousness of God and the benevolence of his grace. Again, the theme of absolute dependency is underscored.

There are, in the prophets, continued references to the place of children in worship. For instance:

"Call a solemn assembly, . . . Gather the children, even the nursing infants" (Joel 2:15-16; see also Zech. 10:6).

And, interestingly enough, we find that just as children are partners in right worship, they are also considered accomplices in idolatry, and as such, are equally accountable with the adults to God:

"Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah . . . ? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger. . . . Behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place" (Jer. 7:17-20).

In addition, we may note that children are explicitly mentioned as a vital part of the remnant of Israel, so essential to its salvation:

"Though I scattered them among the nations, yet in far countries they shall remember me, and with their children they shall live and return" (Zech. 10:9; see also Jer. 43:5-6).

### *Receiving the New Covenant: The Gospels*

It is the faith of the Christian church that through the blood of Jesus of Nazareth a new covenant is established between God and the people, the seal of which is baptism, so that those called by the grace of God and led by the Holy Spirit constitute the "New Israel." Looking back to the tradition of the Torah, the early Christians re-read the Old Testament in the light of Jesus' birth,

life, ministry, death, and resurrection. It is hardly surprising, then, that we find, for example, Matthew quoting the prophet, Isaiah, to explain Jesus' birth (Matt. 1:23), as if to say, "this is the child of whom Isaiah spoke." As we have seen in the history of Israel, the thought of a child leading the people is not an innovation, nor is the model of a child as the gift of God's salvation a new concept. Thus, it is fitting that the themes of covenant and election are supported by the foreordination and births of John and Jesus.

In Jesus' ministry the role of children finds its most explicit expression. The classic example of Jesus' inclusion of the children is familiar to all:

"Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people; but Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' And he laid his hands on them and went away" (Matt. 19:13-15; also Mark, 10:13-14; Luke 18:15-17).

In addition, we find the Gospels accounting for the presence of children in Jesus' midst in the feeding of the multitudes (Matt. 14:21, 15:38; John 6:9), crying our praises to Jesus in the temple on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21:15), and as a teaching model for humility (Matt. 18:2-6; Mark 9:36; Luke 9:47-48). In fact, referring directly to a child in his arms, Jesus tells his disciples not only is he who humbles himself as a child considered greatest in the kingdom, but unless one becomes "as a child" one cannot enter the kingdom at all (Matt. 18:3; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17; see also, 1 Pet. 2:2)!

In a secondary sense, children are afforded a place of prominence in Jesus' teaching in that they are a part of the larger group of the poor and powerless (*mikros*). Jesus specifically admonishes his disciples not to despise the "little ones" (Matt. 18:10). He tells those who will listen not to refuse them charity (Matt. 10:42), not to cause them to sin (Matt. 18:5-6), and he refers directly to "the least" as representing himself, so that to receive a child is to receive Jesus (Matt. 18:5), and to give unto the least is to give unto him (Matt. 25:40).

### *Spreading the Word: The Book of Acts*

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, the Holy Spirit empowers the disciples to be the church, to be witnesses of the salvation of Jesus, and to exercise his transforming power of love throughout the world.

Although there is no mention of children present with the disciples on the day of Pentecost, we do read of Peter's proclamation:

"The promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (2:39).

This corresponds, of course, with the recurring themes of covenant and election we have seen throughout the canon. Another illustration of God's choosing is in reference to the inclusion of the Gentiles:

"They were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (13:48).

In the same manner that salvation was effected for Noah's whole household in the first covenant through the faith of Noah (Gen. 6:18-7:1), we find in Acts similar instances where salvation is imparted to the whole household (*oikos*) through the faith of the head of the family: Cornelius "with all his household" (10:2); Lydia "with her household" (16:15); the Phillipian jailer "and to all that were in his house" (16:32); and Crispus "together with all his household" (18:8). The importance of this *oikos* concept is twofold: First, it reminds us that faith and community are inseparable; and second, that faith and knowledge, though related as we have seen, are not requisite to one another. Rather, belief is a gift, and it is often exercised by some on behalf of many.

There is, in the record of the early church's experience, a touching account of a child present at the service of the Eucharist (20:9). The young lad, Eutychus, asleep in the window, falls from the third floor and is thought to be dead until Paul says otherwise. The boy's age is not specified, however, and his place in the worship service is not clear.

### *Interpreting the Word: The Letters*

Having grown from the teachings of one man to the faith of thousands of believers and spread from Jerusalem to Rome,

Christianity is no longer regarded as a Jewish sect, but a religious outlook seeking to encompass the whole world. The letters of the early church present to us a firsthand glimpse of the church's dynamic struggle to be faithful to the gospel of its Lord, Jesus Christ, in the context of the secular environment.

In general, the letters of Paul reflect the same overarching themes we have seen throughout the canon: election (Rom. 9:6, Gal. 1:15); covenant (Rom. 8:12ff, 1 Cor. 12:12ff, Gal. 3:23-29); faith (Rom. 3:21-25, Gal. 3:6-9). Paul takes a fairly strong negative posture toward the childish tendencies in human behavior, admonishing the Corinthians:

"Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature" (1 Cor. 14:20; also 13:11; 2 Cor. 6:13).

At the same time, however, Paul urges his readers to maintain childlike qualities such as humility and dependency upon God, telling the church at Rome:

"When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15-16, also, 8:21, 9:7-8; 1 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 4:28).

Paul lends support to the *oikos* concept seen in Acts by referring to his having baptized "the household of Stephanas" (1 Cor. 1:16).

In Ephesians we find Paul's understanding of the place of children continued as above. The dichotomy in his attitude can readily be seen in Ephesians by comparing 4:14, "so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine," with 5:1, "therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children." Clearly, the intent is to describe *childishness*, on the one hand, as a trait unsuitable for Christian discipleship, and *childlikeness*, on the other, as a characteristic to be developed.

Generally, throughout the letters of the New Testament, when children are referred to directly it is with the understanding, not unlike the Old Testament, of children as property of their parents, to be managed well (1 Tim. 3:12), kept submissive (1 Tim. 3:4), and subordinate (Titus 1:6).

In 2 Timothy, however, there is a strong indication of the place of children within the family of faith (1:5), and a hint that children might even enjoy some place of participation in worship:

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings" (3:14).

John's letters are the most intriguing as regards the place of children in the faith community. His repeated address to his readers as "little children" (1 John 2:1, 12, 28, 3:7, 18, 4:4, 5:2) is difficult to overlook. The question, of course, is does he mean "children" literally? We might suppose not if it were not for 2:13:

"I am writing to you, fathers . . . (and) to you, young men . . . (and) to you, children, because you know the Father" (1 John 2:13).

John's second letter is even more explicitly addressed to "the elect lady and her children" (2 John 1), and in the body of this letter he writes,

"I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children following the truth" (2 John 4; also see 2 John 13; 3 John 4).

The Apocalypse of John makes no direct reference to children, but in light of what we have witnessed throughout the canon, how children suffered for righteousness' sake with their elders, we might well suppose to find them numbered among the multitude of saints (7:13) and the host of the dead, "great and small," which John envisages.

### *Summary*

In sum then, what we find throughout the witness of the canon is the presence of children in the total life of the faith community. As we have noted, the children's role is certainly not a hallowed one; indeed, at times the attitude toward children seems demeaning. Yet, the children are present, learning the faith through the corporate life experiences of the community, experiencing firsthand their own place as members of the covenant of grace.

In this sense, the community of faith can be aptly described as a family of faith consisting of people of varying ages, of varying abilities, of varying responsibilities, of varying degrees of understanding, of varying degrees of righteousness and faith, all called together by God's choosing and bound together by God's love.

## THE DOCTRINE OF GRACE

We have taken the position that the scripture is primary, and we have started our search as to the place of children in the church with an overview of the canon because the Bible is generally regarded as normative of the church's faith and practice. But in the Wesleyan tradition, scripture takes its place in the "quadrilateral" process of discovery that includes reason, tradition, and experience as well. Thus, even if we could conclusively determine what the Bible says in support of the place of children in worship, this would not be enough. We must continue our journey to see how the place of children in the covenant finds expression in theology and church history.

Christian theology begins as those who believe in Christ seek to explain the substance, form, and nature of their belief. It is faith seeking understanding. It is a process of definition which is ingredient to faith and stimulates further cultivation of faith. Christian theology does not arise in a vacuum but is centered in the lively and often intense struggles of the faith community seeking to combat heresy and overcome controversy and strife among its ranks.

### *Infant Baptism*

The controversy surrounding the place and role of children in the church came to surface around the close of the second century with regard to the widespread practice of infant baptism. The first commentator on the subject was a writer by the name of Tertullian.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of the issue were two related doctrines, original sin and the grace of God. Tertullian objected to the practice of infant baptism for he believed that sin is a matter of the will, and as such, is contingent upon the intent of the individual. Infants, lacking a conscious intent to do wrong would thus be

immune from the judgment of sin. For Tertullian there was a distinct age of accountability coinciding with puberty (age 14, to be exact) at which the consequences of sin would take effect.<sup>2</sup>

Though hardly sufficient to withstand the rigors of later testing, Tertullian's writing reflects the early development of Christian theology and provides a stepping stone upon which others would tread as they further developed the argument.

A later writer, Cyprian, takes up the matter from Tertullian and advances the thought; in particular, developing the concept of original sin.<sup>3</sup> Cyprian's contribution is important in that he not only articulates an early explanation of the doctrine of original sin and relates it clearly to the doctrine of grace through infant baptism, but that his writing reflects the view of a whole synod meeting in Carthage (ca. 251) attended by sixty-seven bishops of the church! Thus, in this instance, the opinion is not just that of an individual theologian, but reflects the theology of the church in the whole of North Africa in the third century. It is worthwhile to read a portion of Cyprian's letter:

“... Nobody is hindered from baptism and from grace—how much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approached the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins—that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another.

And therefore, dearest brother, this was our opinion of the council, that by us no one ought to be hindered from baptism and from the grace of God, who is merciful and kind and loving to all. Which, since it is to be observed and maintained in respect of all, we think is to be even more observed in respect to infants and newly-born persons, who on this very account deserve more from our help and from the divine mercy.”<sup>4</sup>

#### *Augustine and the Doctrine of Grace*

In the time between Cyprian and Tertullian a fundamental belief and practice of the early church was emerging: that since by our very nature we are sinful and unworthy of God's love, we are accepted by his grace, effected once and for all in the death and

resurrection of Jesus and symbolized in the practice of infant baptism. What remains to be seen is whether or not this now tenuously held doctrine of grace can withstand the force of its critics.

More than a century later the challenge finally arises. The scene is the Pelagian controversy. In the center of the controversy is a monk by the name of Augustine of Hippo. And at stake is nothing less than the doctrine of grace.

On the one hand, Augustine maintains that salvation is by grace alone. The Creator is *solely* responsible. His grace is rooted in love and is not contingent upon the action or inaction of his beloved. One can neither merit nor cancel God's gracious initiative. What matters only is God's choosing, and that choosing takes effect before birth. Baptism, then, is the seal of the covenant initiated by God with his people. Like circumcision in the Jewish faith, baptism is performed in the early days of infancy and symbolizes the total dependency of the individual upon God and the unconditional acceptance of the individual. For Augustine and the early church, the symbolism of infant baptism was dramatic in that, if an infant who is incapable of achieving any moral success can be accepted in God's sight, then salvation depends surely upon grace and not works.

The Pelagians argued the corollary. They reasoned, if infants can do no good, then neither can they do evil. And if they are incapable of evil, then they are not subject to the judgment and thus, they have no need of baptism.

Augustine responded to the Pelagians with a solid doctrine of original sin. His argument was simple: All are born into sin—not sin such as that intentionally committed by rational adults; but original sin, sin inherent in the species. Augustine writes:

"I have always held from the beginning of my conversion . . . that through one man sin entered the world and through sin death, and thus death has passed to all men, in whom all have sinned."<sup>5</sup>

Augustine insisted that ". . . all men are understood to have sinned in that first man, because all men were in him when he sinned."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, for Augustine, original sin is not a matter of one's sinning, but, rather, of one's sinfulness. Sin is a condition, not a series of acts. Furthermore, this condition is not upon frail individuals, but it is upon the whole creation.

Being universally present, original sin for Augustine is perpetuated, passed on from one generation to the next, through concupiscence, or "carnal begetting." As Augustine puts it:

"For just as infants did not imitate Christ because they cannot do so, yet can receive his spiritual grace, so without imitating the first man they are nonetheless bound by contagion from his carnal generation."<sup>7</sup>

Through this model Augustine clearly portrays humankind's hopeless condition from which there is no escape except by the grace of God. We enter the world in sin, having no choice but to dwell in that state until, dying to sin, we are reborn of water and the Spirit through the sacrament of Holy Baptism.

Of course, Augustine's critics were quick to seize upon the apparent flaw in his argument, i.e., what about children born to holy (Christian) parents? Would not these children be born into the faith, and as such, into righteousness? If so, would they not be exempt from baptism?

For Augustine there are no exceptions. Children born of holy parents and children born of pagans are no different in kind. Both are contaminated by the Fall. Both stand in need of God's grace through baptism.

Augustine presents his case concretely by use of a clever and convincing agrarian model. He writes: "Wheat is cleansed of chaff as man is cleansed of sin, yet other wheat sprouts from it with chaff."<sup>8</sup> But his argument is not limited to the analogy. He finds support also in the earlier Jewish tradition of circumcision which, for Augustine, clearly runs parallel to baptism in the Christian faith.

Thus, in Augustine's understanding of the human condition there is no hope of salvation apart from God's grace. Infants are born into the sin of Adam, even infants born of righteous parents. All stand in need of the cleansing of sin afforded in the sacrament of baptism. Furthermore, accepting the belief that grace is dispensed without regard for merit (or lack of it), infant baptism is understood to be the normative practice in that even adults who petition for the sacrament recognize that in so doing they come before God as "infants" in his sight, having at the same time both nothing to offer and nothing to be ashamed of.

### *The Believing Community*

Augustine, however, faces yet another serious objection to his doctrine; that is, what about the necessity of faith? Is not baptism an act of faith on the part of the believer? And did not the Apostle Paul explicitly state:

**"The righteousness of God has been manifested . . . through faith in Jesus Christ *for all who believe*" (Rom. 3:21-22).**

Augustine's critics could not overlook the obvious objection. How can infants who are incapable of believing be said to have obtained salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ? Can one possibly contend that baptism should apply to them?

As Augustine is equally stern to point out, the flaw in his opponents' understanding of faith is the same flaw as had previously been revealed with regard to sin. Faith for Augustine is not simply an ability on the part of the believer to comprehend and consent; rather, it is a gift of God working in and through the larger community of faith. Otherwise, faith itself would be a work, and as such, a meritorious act deserving of salvation.<sup>1</sup> But faith is given, Augustine contends. It is not a property one achieves and possesses; rather, it is a spiritual quality in which one participates, as much so as a recipient as a contributor.

Specifically in regard to the faith of infants, Augustine writes:

**"Just as it was another's work when he (the infant) sinned in another, (so) it is another's work when he believes through another."<sup>9</sup>**

The faith of the infant is supplied by the faith of the parents, guardians, and the church at-large. As Augustine expressed it so clearly against Julian:

**"Whether you will or not, we hold that infants believe in Christ through the hearts and voices of those who carry them."<sup>10</sup>**

**"Both adults, through their heart and voice, and infants, through that of another, believe and confess so that they may be reconciled to God through the death of His Son; lest the wrath of God rest upon them whom their vitiated origin makes guilty."<sup>11</sup>**

Thus, what we observe operating in Augustine's theology of infant baptism is perhaps best described as a sort of "vicarious faith": infants receiving salvation through baptism (grace) by means of the faith of others.

Needless to say, there are ample biblical precedents to support such a thesis. For instance, the healing of the paralytic brought to Jesus on a stretcher was said to be because of "their faith," i.e., the faith of the paralytic's friends (Mark 2:1ff.); likewise, the healing of Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:41ff.), and the healing of the centurion's servant (Matt. 8:5ff.). In addition, there is Paul's elaborate argument in 1 Corinthians 7:14 regarding the sanctity of the home involving mixed marriages.

Yet it is the broader impact of the thesis that is most crucial to Augustine's doctrine of grace; that is, we have seen that the dispensation of grace is not contingent upon the faithfulness of the individual. What we must now conclude is that grace is not merely a matter of the individual at all, but a matter of the community of faith with respect to the whole of creation. That is, one's salvation is obtained through the faith of many on behalf of others, all governed and made possible by the prevenient grace of God.

Furthermore, if the experience of salvation goes beyond the individual and his or her faithfulness, it also transcends the whole realm of conscious thought. Even the most cursory glance will reveal the fundamental importance of this point with regard to the baptism of infants. This is why Augustine takes certain care in writing against Julian to explain:

"Just as guilt which was remitted only by regeneration was not sensed when it inhered, so its removal is accepted by faith, but not sensed by the flesh or the mind."<sup>12</sup>

And so, what we conclude from Augustine's theology of infant baptism is nothing short of his whole doctrine of grace, that one's need for salvation is not incurred, but inherited; and that one's receiving of salvation is not achieved, but received freely, without regard for virtue or vice.

The Augustinian doctrine of grace not only survived the test of the Pelagians, but it has continued to prevail throughout the history of the church, most notably in the theology of Martin Luther and John Wesley. So that today the cornerstone of our faith as United Methodists is the Augustinian doctrine of grace ex-

pressed concretely in the practice of infant baptism, just as Wesley himself admonished his followers in his own lifetime when he wrote:

"On the whole, therefore, it is not only lawful and innocent, but meet, right, and our bounden duty, in conformity to the uninterrupted practice of the whole Church of Christ from the earliest ages, to consecrate our children to God by baptism, as the Jewish church was commanded to do by circumcision."<sup>13</sup>

The impact of the Augustinian doctrine of grace upon the place and role of children in the church is enormous. For once we grasp the concept that it is not by merit that we are accepted but by grace alone, we begin to see that the depth of our own understanding, the maturity of our faith, the extent of our good works, the degree of our righteous thought and behavior do not qualify us for God's kingdom, nor does the lack thereof disqualify us. Our place is solely a matter of God's choosing.

At the very least this implies that children who may lack the emotional maturity, the cultural sophistication, and the intellectual appreciation of the adults are no less suited for worship of the Almighty. In fact, lacking these qualities, they may even be said to be more suited in that they would have less reason for pretense! This further implies that not only is the place of children in worship acceptable in God's sight, but the children's expressions of faith, however simplistic, misplaced, or even crude can be counted as acts of worthy praise.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

1. Jeroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, Vol. 1), p. 290.
2. *De Anima*, 38:1.
3. Pelikan, *Emergence*, p. 291.
4. *Epistles*, 64:4.
5. Augustine, "Against Julian," *The Fathers of the Church* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1957, Vol. 35, Book 6), pp. 307-396.
6. Augustine, "Against Two Letters of the Pelagians," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner's, 1908, First Series, Vol. 5), pp. 377-434.
7. Augustine, "Against Julian," 6.79.
8. *Ibid.*, 6.15.
9. *Ibid.*, 6.29.
10. *Ibid.*, 6.6.
11. *Ibid.*, 6.79.
12. *Ibid.*, 6.12.
13. Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 324-332.
14. As noted in the previous chapter, Jesus' reference to the "little ones" in his midst (*mikros*) should be understood to include the whole range of the poor and powerless including children, the handicapped, the widowed and orphaned, the outcast, and the alien. Conversely, substituting *mikros* for children, we have even more reason to point out the inclusive nature of the church, the sole criterion of grace, and the audacity to accept any artificially imposed qualifications which would elevate some and disqualify others in the presence of God.

## HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Uncovering the place and role of children in the Bible and in early Christian theology is a relatively simple matter compared to tracing the children's place and role in the history of the Christian church. The history surrounding children in the church is extremely obscure. The evidence is simply insufficient to establish any sense of continuity from the first century to the present. At best one can point to a few isolated and virtually unrelated incidences, historical highlights, if you will, in which the question of the children's place in the covenanted community is raised.

That the history of children in the church is obscure does not prove that they were unimportant in the community. For what we know about the nature of history itself is that history is written in the context of development and change, controversy, question, and issues of crucial concern. Therefore, we might assume that the lack of visibility of the place of children in the life of the church is an indication of widespread acceptance of the children's place and role.

Further, our knowledge of the place of children in the total community of faith in Judaism and the early Christian church suggests that children may have been a part of every major experience throughout the history of Christendom. They would have been affected, directly or indirectly, by such major events as the persecutions and the crusades, by the changes brought about during the Monastic Period, the Scholastic Period, the Renaissance, the Reformation, Puritanism, the Enlightenment, Revivalism, etc. Just as children in the present day are profoundly influenced by the forces of humanism, fundamentalism, and evangelical theology, so we may assume that their lives have been deeply influenced by the various events and circumstances prevailing in the church in their day.<sup>1</sup>

### *Luther's Catechisms*

One historical highlight centers on the Protestant Reformation and the catechisms of Martin Luther. Luther and the early reform-

ers were faced with a difficult situation: the strict legalism and authority of the Roman church had been broken, but nothing prevailed to take its place. Hence there was a growing ignorance of the Christian faith among Protestants and a rapid deterioration of their moral behavior. Luther's task was to devise a means by which the principles of Christian discipline within the doctrine of grace could be learned and appropriated in the life of every believer. His answer was to write two catechisms: a larger one, comprehensive and detailed, for the parents and other adults who would instruct children and other "simple folk" in the Christian faith; and a smaller one, a shorter, simplified version of the larger, intended for the children to learn by memory.

The Luther Catechisms still in use today are based upon what Luther considered to be the essential articles of the Christian faith: The Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism, and the Eucharist. In addition, the Short Catechism has two appendices: one concerning morning and evening prayers or blessings, the other listing duties for those with various positions of responsibility.

The Short Catechism is in didactic form. The instructor asks a question and the child responds with the appropriate answer. Each of the questions and answers uses concepts (though not necessarily the vocabulary) well within the child's grasp, and is expressed in a positive manner. The overarching themes of the Short Catechism are that God loves all people and the Holy Ordinances are intended for our benefit that we might more easily receive God's love.

Luther's method is threefold: Learn the text, strive to understand the implications, and advance to the Larger Catechism in time with sufficient understanding to instruct others.

Without attempting in any way to critique Luther's catechisms, what we find important here is the underlying presumption of the children's place within the covenanted community. That is, precisely as we have seen throughout the Old Testament, Luther understands that children are an essential part of the church for whom the grace of God is extended. His concern is that they grow in the understanding of their faith. In this way Luther reflects the view of St. Augustine that faith is not a property one achieves or possesses, but a spiritual quality in which one participates. Luther, in his catechisms, is not seeking to convey faith. That, he understands, is given. What he is concerned to do is impart a sufficient knowledge of faith. Retrospectively then, we can see that whereas Luther's concern to make "priests" of all

believers is diametrically opposed to the Roman view, the place of children as members of the covenanted community is, in this sense, complementary to the understanding of Roman Catholicism and its elaborate system of catechetical training!

### *The Half-Way Covenant*

Another historical highlight involving the place of children in the church is a controversy of the seventeenth century centered in Puritan New England.<sup>2</sup> Rooted in the theology of John Calvin, immigrants came to America seeking not only to practice their religion in freedom, but to build a theocracy: a social, economic, and political system based upon their religious beliefs. But, in addition, when the Puritans settled into their new homeland they made certain innovations of their own which proved to have radical consequences. Seeking purity of religious expression, a church of the visible saints, the Puritans came to stress the conscious conversion experience as the normative act of salvation rather than baptism and the growing knowledge of faith. This shift in emphasis had profound effects on everyone, not the least of which were the children! A contemporary historian, Robert Ulich, writes:

"Children, without regard for age, were thrown into the religious excitement. They were praised for having the marks of 'aged Christianity' upon them and for being already old though young, 'full of grace, though not full of days.'"<sup>3</sup>

Restricting church membership to testified regenerate members and their children ensured the purity these early "congregational" churches desired, free from the notorious sinner and what we today might call the nominal Christian. But it created another problem: What about the children as they matured? The historian, R. G. Pope, summarizes the problem in this way:

"If these children were members in their infancy, albeit incomplete, what happened to their church status if conversion failed to materialize? Were they still members? If not, when had their membership ceased? More important, what was the status of their own children: could the next generation receive baptism even though its parents were not communicants; did apparently unregenerate parents terminate the covenant relation?"<sup>4</sup>

Needless to say, the question over the place, role, and status of the children in the church raised considerable controversy and debate. The issue was finally brought to focus in a special synod convened in Massachusetts in 1662. The question this synod sought to resolve was, "Who are the subjects of baptism?" The synod's answer, virtually unanimous, was: "Members of the Visible Church . . . Confederate visible Believers, in particular churches, and their infant-seed."<sup>5</sup>

This "Half-Way Synod," as it was called, thus provided the grounds for a "half-way covenant" whereby not only baptized children but others, including baptized adults, might be recognized as participants in the community of faith, subject to the church's discipline, and capable of transmitting baptism to others, but excluded from the Lord's Supper and voting rights, all without the evidence of a conscious conversion experience.

The issue underlying the half-way covenant was not the place of children in the community of faith, but the children's children, as it were—that is, whether the children of nonregenerate members (those who had been baptized but failed to demonstrate a conscious conversion experience) were to be baptized. The Synod's decision that they indeed were to be baptized is a clear indication that even within the rigid structure of the Puritan church the place of children was assured.

#### *Horace Bushnell*

The place of children in the church surfaces again in the writings of the nineteenth century Congregational pastor/theologian, Horace Bushnell.<sup>6</sup> Bushnell's principal work and by far his most important contribution to theological inquiry was his book, *Christian Nurture*. As with any serious work, his thoughts did not arise in a vacuum, but were a reaction, in this case a negative reaction, to the revivalism of his day.

Bushnell found the theology of Revivalism personally affronting. He specifically reacted to the treatment of children as being under the wrath of God. He deplored the church of his day which had little place for the acceptance of children, and he objected to the unnatural separation of children from their parents by virtue of the salvation afforded for adults but not for children in the prevailing theology of Revivalism. All of this led to Bushnell's statement which shocked all of New England, that "the child should grow up as a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise."<sup>7</sup>

Bushnell's essence of Christian nurture was what he perceived to be the organic unity of the family. He writes:

"This is the very idea of Christian nurture, that it begins with nurture or cultivation, and the intention is that the Christian life and spirit of the parents which are in and by the spirit of God shall flow into the mind of the child to blend with his incipient and half-formed exercises that they shall thus beget their own good within him, their thoughts, opinions, faith, and love, which are to become a little more, and yet a little more his own separate exercise, but still the same in character."<sup>8</sup>

So paramount for Bushnell is the role of the family in the Christian nurture of the child that he is willing to call the Christian home "the church of childhood, with the table and hearth, a holy rite."<sup>9</sup>

Bushnell understood the relation of parents to children to be overpowering, inextricable, and unavoidable. The parents are God to the child. And what is important is the parents' loving example, the impression of righteousness transmitted in the intimate bond of the family. Bushnell maintains that whatever is taught must be in terms of living examples; truth must be lived into meaning before it can be truly known. At the same time, he stressed that "long before children can be taught about having a new heart or sharing Christ's atonement they can exercise a right spirit, and thus they come to a gentle emotion of love for what is right."<sup>10</sup>

Bushnell's understanding of the process of Christian nurture and the dynamic role of parenting is grounded in his understanding of the Augustinian doctrine of grace. He writes, "God is at work in the processes of nurture. God desires that children will grow up in piety, and God makes available whatever grace is necessary to accomplish this goal."<sup>11</sup>

But clearly the agents of God's grace for Bushnell are the parents. This is most readily seen with regard to infant baptism. Here Bushnell lays out a rather intricate argument for infant baptism which is quite consistent with his principles of Christian nurture. He says:

"Baptism involves regeneration, but it is not actual, only presumptive, and everything depends on the organic law of character pertaining to the parent and child, the church and the

child; thus, upon duty and holy living and gracious example. The child is too young to choose the right for himself, but the parent, having him as it were in his own life is allowed the confidence that his own faith and character will be reproduced in the child and grow up in his growth, and that thus the propriety of the right as a seal of faith will not be violated. God acts through this right, and his sovereignty operates through this means of grace."<sup>12</sup>

Bushnell is a bold advocate for the role of parents, both theologically and sociologically. He states, "The true ministers of baptism are the parents, and through their lack of faith they can frustrate the will of God."<sup>13</sup> And he has little regard for surrogate parenting, so prevalent in his day and in our own. He poses the question: "Is the child to reflect the virtues of the hireling or the sentiments of the parents?"<sup>14</sup>

This system of Christian nurture finds support for Bushnell in the scriptures. He quotes in particular Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it"; and Ephesians 6:4, "Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Bushnell writes, "Thus we have confidence in the organic law whereby parents pass on their faith to their children as described in 2 Timothy, 'the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that is in thee also'" (2 Tim. 1:5).

Bushnell's concept of Christian nurture finds immediate and practical expression in terms of Christian education, confirmation, and worship. In regard to the former, it is clear from the understanding of the organic unity of the family that the early learning process is not simply cognitive, but affective. Thus, Bushnell would have us know that before the church seeks to impart Christian doctrine it must presume that the educational process is already in force. "What is important [in teaching] is that children be reinforced in what has been learned from their parents, for children will only slowly grow beyond the authority of their parents."<sup>15</sup>

With regard to confirmation Bushnell is well ahead of his time. As an outgrowth of his doctrine of infant baptism, Bushnell understands children to be full members of the church, regardless of any experience of conversion or confession. He uses the analogy of civil law to make the point that

Infants are full citizens even if they cannot vote . . . and so in

the church, infants are made members through their baptism. It stands for the present in the faith of their parents and the promise which is to them and to their children. In due time they will grow into a mature faith, but they are accounted believers from their baptism on. When the time comes for a mature statement, this should be a form of assumption, tendered in place of a confession.”<sup>16</sup>

But perhaps Bushnell’s theology has its greatest impact on the church’s worship. Professor Randolph Crump Miller states of Bushnell:

“Bushnell would have none of this [excluding children from worship]. He would have children present in worship, welcomed at Holy Communion, and recognized in terms of some special exercise or service. ‘They should be formally addressed and prayed with,’ that’s a direct quote! ‘They should join in the hymns, especially simple ones such as those used by the Moravians.’”<sup>17</sup>

In particular, Bushnell advocates preaching to children. The whole context of his thought here is important. For on the one hand Bushnell would contend that children should receive the proclamation of the gospel firsthand for their own benefit as full members of the church. But at the same time Bushnell clearly sees preaching to children as a necessary discipline for preaching to adults. He says, “I think I see it clearly, we do not preach well to adults because we do not learn how to preach to children.”<sup>18</sup> Recognizing the children’s place in worship and accommodating their needs is not a patronizing but an edifying act on the part of adults!

Thus, what we find in Bushnell’s writing is the necessary antithesis to the extremes of Revivalism which, not unlike Puritanism, stressed the importance of conversion to the distortion of grace. Underlying the dialogue between Bushnell and the Revivalists is a pervasive tension rooted in the New Testament and persistent throughout church history, a tension between the need to evangelize the non-Christian and the need to nurture the Christian already within the community of faith.

Seen from the perspective of grace and covenant, the message of the evangel incarnate in Jesus Christ is the love of God and the acceptance of all persons, and the call of the evangel is to be-

come a part of that faith already bestowed and to grow in its understanding. Thus, we maintain that in the periods of church history in which any criteria (such as the conscious conversion experience) are imposed to the destruction of the inclusive nature of the church, these criteria are artificial and alien to the gospel of our Lord. And, as we have seen, it is the presence of the children within the church which continually compels the church to re-examine and take seriously its inclusive nature.

And so, with the witness of scripture, theology, and history at our side, we take the position that children do occupy an essential place within the church, and as such, should play a vital role in its total life and work. The question we must now face is how can we take seriously the nature of children and effectively relate the life of the church, particularly its worship, to them?

#### NOTES

1. For a fascinating description of the effect of religious orientation and the understanding of the place and role of children and patterns of child-rearing in one particular period of history, see: Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: Knopf Publishers, 1978).
2. For a brief, concise exposition of this issue, see: Mary M. Currie, "The Puritan Half-Way Covenants—A Contemporary Issue," *Austin Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XCV, No. 3 (October 1979).
3. Robert Ulich, *A History of Religious Education* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), pp. 149-150.
4. R. G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
6. For a more complete overview of Bushnell's life and work, see: Randolph Crump Miller, "Horace Bushnell: Prophet to America's Children," *Perkins Journal*, Vol. XXXII, No. 3 (Spring 1979).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
8. *Ibid.*.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

## STAGES OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT

The starting place for relating to children is to understand the nature of children. The experience I shared earlier as a parent in relation to our first child is the key: I began trying to make him understand my language; I learned instead to understand his language. This is the task, to become sensitive to the "language" of children, to see the world from their perspective, to unlock the form of their logic, to appreciate the mysteries of their life experiences.

### *Developmental Psychology*

One very helpful resource to discovering the world of childhood is the field of developmental psychology. Although a relatively young science, developmental psychology finds its roots in centuries of human observation and experience. For instance, parents have noted since the beginning of time that their children seem to grow along the lines of certain predictable patterns of thought and behavior. Children must crawl before they can walk. They must make cooing, guttural, and lisping sounds before they talk. They must have some mastery of their hand and finger movements before they can successfully manipulate a spoon or a fork. From ongoing human experience we have recognized that children go through certain stages in their development: "the terrible twos," "the tranquil threes," etc.

In recent years these general intuitions have been tested and refined. Through the research of such persons as Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Robert Selman, Ronald Goldman, Lawrence Kohlberg, Sam Keen, James Fowler, and others, we are now able to describe the various stages of maturation in virtually every arena of human growth: cognitive development, social awareness, symbolic functioning, world coherence, role-taking abilities, authority models, and moral development. And by understanding the stage at which a particular individual or group is functioning,

we are able to devise ways to communicate directly and relate successfully with that individual or group.

Developmental psychology is not limited to the study of child development, of course, but encompasses the various stages of life at all ages. But since our concern at this point is the nature of children, we will restrict our discussion of developmental psychology only to the early stages of human development.

Perhaps the most widely recognized authority in the area of children's cognitive development is Jean Piaget.<sup>1</sup> In his studies of child development Piaget observed four distinct stages: the sensorimotor period (birth to age 18 months), the preoperational period (18 months to ages 5-6), the period of concrete operations (ages 5-7 to 11-13), and the period of formal operations (adolescence and adulthood). Of course, the age range of each stage is very approximate, depending upon the individual child, the learning environment, etc. Piaget's essential point, and the claim of developmental psychology generally, is that the stages of development (however one chooses to describe them) are universal and sequential, that each individual progresses (at whatever rate) from one stage to the next in a fixed order so that each stage is prerequisite to the next.

### *Infancy*

With regard to our relating to children in the church, and particularly children in worship, the findings of Piaget help us to see that in the early months of the child's life the relation of the child to the parent is primary. Children are just learning to differentiate between themselves and the world about them. Though they lack the ability to reason and comprehend, children are extremely sensitive to the stimulation of music, lights, smells, and warm cuddling.

For the very youngest children, then, the church's worship can be seen as a virtual wonderland of interest and beauty where, held securely in parents' arms, they are able to look with amazement at the stained glass windows, the banners, the lights overhead, to hear the majesty of the organ, the voices of the congregation, and to smell the aroma of the burning candles and the perfume of nearby worshipers. Contrary to the notion that children "just don't get anything out of it," such experiences of worship in the earliest days of infancy can form lasting impressions for children, which will later serve to help them form the

necessary associations between the community of faith and the love of God.

In the church where I now serve, the kitchen is directly adjacent to the sanctuary. One Sunday last year we planned a celebration of the Eucharist around a seating arrangement using folding tables and chairs. Upon each table was to be placed a loaf of bread and a chalice of wine. To make the morning even more complete, I went to the church in the early hours of the morning and baked the bread there in the church oven. When the congregation arrived, not only was the bread baked and ready to be served warm, but the whole sanctuary was filled with the fragrance of freshly baked bread! For weeks afterwards individuals would mention the feelings they had on that day and how it brought back many fond memories of childhood in the kitchen of their mother or grandmother. The earliest experiences of worship, however unconscious in our psyche, can be just as real and precious.

Of course there is always the problem of crying children. I suppose this "problem" is as old as worship itself. But is our only alternative to deny children the rich experiences afforded in the worship setting? My experience has been that the crying of children in church is mostly disruptive to the parents of the children and is not that offensive to the other adults. One alternative to taking children completely out of the worship service is to have the space and the freedom to walk with children along the periphery of the sanctuary; i.e., in the back of the sanctuary, in the foyer, etc. In this way children can find it easier to relax and fall asleep and the parents can preserve the continuity of the service for themselves. Such a situation demands the support of the congregation for parents and children and the understanding that walking a child while listening to the sermon does not reflect an absence of piety or respect.

### *The Twos*

As children grow and develop in their mental and physical maturity, their needs and interests become decidedly different from the days of infancy. Being now able to walk and talk with growing confidence, children experiment with everything in sight. Their need is to unlock the mystery of cause and effect. To manipulate an object successfully so as to exercise control over it gives children unmeasured joy and builds self-confidence.

The early days of this stage have been aptly and sometimes not so affectionately labeled, "the terrible twos." The "terrible" nature of the twos is not that the children are bad, but that their behavior is not conducive to many social settings. They are a bundle of energy and curiosity. To be themselves they must be able to move about and explore. Though hardly an optimum time in their life for social conditioning, this stage is an excellent time for self-discovery and personal growth.

As many mothers, fathers, and patient friends have experienced, trying to corral youngsters in church at this stage is frustrating and nearly impossible. The parents often bring to the pew pencils, crayons, chewing gum, car keys, pictures, etc., to try to hold the children's attention and prevent them from disturbing others by kicking, squirming, crying, pulling out the hymnal, and asking loudly, "Is it almost over?"

A third alternative to imposing strict discipline on the one hand and having the children swinging from the altar rail on the other hand is to provide simultaneously a children's church hour in another location. Designed precisely for this age group, the children's church hour can be a learning time for the children in which they become acquainted with Bible stories, Christian symbols, songs, prayers, etc., within an environment that allows them lots of movement and exploration. During this period of their lives they are allowed to experience the church with a new source of independence and autonomy so essential to their development, but at the same time they are enabled by the church's structure to feel a high degree of acceptance and support, affirmation and love.

The children's coordinator at our church designed just such a program, and it has been both a source of blessing for the children and a welcome relief for the parents. At its inception she was able to convey to the parents what the children's church hour was all about and gain their immediate cooperation and support by placing a simple sign on the door which read:

Parents

Please let us love your children in the nursery!

We will sing with them,

We will play with them,

We will pray with them,

Activities are planned for children up to Kindergarten age.

If we need you,

We promise to send for you.

This is the *Children's Church Hour*. Please knock. Thanks!

### *James Fowler: Stage One*

This leads us to the next stage in the child's development which begins roughly at age four. Rather than continuing with Piaget's stages, we turn now to a later researcher, James Fowler, who builds upon the findings of Piaget, but expands the application of the stages to encompass in more detail the various aspects of behavior listed earlier. According to Fowler's scheme there are six stages of human development, the first two applying to children. Fowler's Stage One applies to children, ages 4 to 7 or 8. Stage Two applies to children, ages 6 or 7 to 11 or 12. Stage Three applies to early adolescents and continues into adulthood. Here again, as the overlapping of the ages indicates, the age range is intended only as an approximation based upon Fowler's research findings.<sup>2</sup>

Fowler names Stage One of his faith development theory "intuitive-projective." He sees the Stage One individual as vaguely aware of the self in a world full of novelty and change, a world of interesting, perplexing, yet unrelated objects and experiences. To describe Stage One in more detail, we might separate the six "aspects" of faith development Fowler poses (though such a separation is artificial) and characterize the typical Stage One child as follows:

*A. Logic:* Stage One children's logic is "pre-operational" (Piaget). They lack inductive-deductive reasoning capabilities. They can solve a problem forward, but they cannot reverse the sequence and retrace the steps backward. They tend to merge fact and fantasy. Imaginary figures have real-life qualities. A firefighter dressed in a firefighter's hat, coat, and boots is totally unrelated to the same person dressed in a suit or plain clothes. There is a magical character to life so that for reindeer to fly or a chubby Santa Claus to descend through a narrow chimney poses no problem at all!

When our youngest son was three years old he was absolutely fascinated by the mail service. To deposit a letter in the mailbox one day and receive a response a few days later was akin to a magician's pulling a rabbit out of a hat!

*B. World Coherence:* Life for the Stage One child is largely episodic. Experiences are unrelated, lacking continuity and scheme. It is not at all unusual for children at this stage to attend a movie wherein they may watch the screen in five-minute (or less!) intervals, make intermittent trips to the bathroom, water

fountain, and snack bar, and come out fully professing to have "seen the show."

C. *Role-Taking*: Stage One children are egocentric. Their world centers around themselves. They lack the ability to assume a third-person perspective. They are unempathetic. For a frustrated parent to plead with the Stage One child, "How do you think that makes me feel?" is futile. It is to ask the impossible. The proper response for the child at this stage would simply be, "I don't know."

My wife stumbled onto this characteristic one day in trying to explain the relationship of grandma to one of our children. She patiently explained that grandma was her mother, just like she was the child's mother. After several attempts and much dialogue, our son looked up at her in amazement and said, "You mean *you* have a mommy?"

D. *Authority*: For the Stage One child total authority is centered in the parents. What daddy or mommy says is the law. Their wisdom is absolute and not subject to question. The consequences of doing what they say is reward, and of not doing what they say is punishment. Interestingly, this authority is based not upon education or age, but size. "They know, because they're biggest."

E. *Social Awareness*: The boundary of social awareness for the child at Stage One is the family. The family constitutes the child's identity and frame of reference. At this stage there is no awareness of racial, ethnic, religious, or class distinctions.

F. *Moral Development*: Children at Stage One are largely amoral. Their actions are not related to intention or will. Their behavior is responsive and impulsive. They may "mean" to knock down another child because of a dispute over a toy, but they lack the logic to connect injustice with revenge. In this sense the child does not intend to harm the other. The degree of right and wrong is directly related to the consequences. To break a small glass is a lesser offense than to break a large glass, never mind that one of them might be crystal!

G. *Symbols*: For the Stage One child, the symbol equals what is symbolized. The concept of the family as a symbol would be explained by the child at Stage One simply by listing the individual members of the family. There would be no allowance for generalizations beyond the precise definition.

Because of their more mature physical development, their growing attention span, and their curiosity to build upon the now

functioning patterns of cognitive and social understandings, I believe Stage One children are ready to re-enter the sphere of worship and begin experiencing anew the sights, sounds, and proceedings of the worship service. This is not at all to say the service will "relate" to their understanding, but the children and the service are at least not incompatible. And, as we shall see, the stimulation of experience with the worship setting will come to have more and more appeal to children as they approach Stage Two.

### *Fowler: Stage Two*

Fowler's title for Stage Two is "mythical-literal." Typically, the child between six or seven and eleven or twelve (the elementary school years) lives partly in a private world of fantasy and wonder, and partly in a more practical, empirical world. To be more precise, let us review the "aspects" of faith development.

A. *Logic*: The Stage Two child functions cognitively at the level of "concrete operations." The child at this stage has an enormous capacity for being able to learn names, memorize facts, understand causal relationships, to generalize, categorize, and perform reversible functions. The child at Stage Two has grown out of the former tendency to merge fact and fantasy and has generally lost the magical character of the world which is so typical of Stage One (for example, "I won the race because I had faster shoes," but now, "I won the race because my legs are stronger.") The child at Stage Two is limited by the inability to reason abstractly and the necessity to perceive literally.

B. *World Coherence*: The child at Stage Two understands the world in story form. Continuity links experience. A typical description of walking home from school for the Stage Two child might involve a twenty-minute narrative as every detail is carefully outlined and described. If asked about his new baby sister, the Stage One child might respond, "Daddy got her at the hospital," whereas the Stage Two child might well describe the various stages of pregnancy, the labor pains, the trip to the hospital, the birth process, and the trip back home!

C. *Role-Taking*: Stage Two children are able to empathize in a primary sense, that is, assume a third person perspective within the range of their experience. Children at Stage Two will relate well to such biblical injunctions as the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. They can identify with a character in a story, especially if it is another boy or girl (for example, in the feeding of the five thousand).

**D. Authority:** The Stage One model of parental authority has expanded in Stage Two to that of other trusted adults. The strict relation of authority to size has given way to respect for those who show decisiveness, confidence, and straightforward logic. Stage Two children are largely dependent upon the validation of others for their judgments and decisions.

**E. Social Awareness:** Where at Stage One children were strictly family-oriented, making no ethnic, racial, religious, or class distinctions, Stage Two children are very socially minded, choosing to stereotype people into categories and associate only with those similar to themselves.

**F. Moral:** The Stage Two child has a strict sense of fairness. Reciprocity is underscored. Beginning canons of judgment are operational, such as assessing someone's liability for a wrong action in relation to degree of intent. The Stage Two child is one who is apt to scream: "But I didn't *mean* to do it!" Fowler terms this stage "instrumental hedonism." If it's painful, it's wrong; if it's pleasurable, it can't be all bad! Moral judgments tend to be quite legalistic and rigid.

**G. Symbols:** A literal cognitive understanding governs the Stage Two child's ability to comprehend symbols. Contrary to Stage One, the child is able to distinguish between the symbol and the object, but the symbol must stand strictly for the symbolized (e.g., green light equals "go"). The Stage Two child tends to maintain an anthropomorphic image of God (and Satan!).

Generally, the child at Stage Two is a person whose world is very much as it seems to be on the surface. Objects and thought concepts are concrete and, for the most part, tangible. Logic is straightforward. People are grouped together logically, they relate to each other fairly (or they are punished fairly), those who know the answers are respected as leaders, and the whole scheme fits together as any well-written novel should!

Due to the fully involved nature of Stage Two children and their desire to make sense of the world about them to the last detail, I find it imperative to involve these children in the worship service. The children at this stage are able to read if the words are not too hard. And they are able to comprehend if the logic is not too abstract. By exercising a little care it is quite possible for the pastor and/or worship committee to design the worship so that the Stage Two children are able to understand and participate in the service and to give as well as receive.

And because children at Stage Two want so very much to understand the church's faith, to put the pieces together for themselves, and to be included, I have come to direct a special time in the service to these children, a time that might loosely be called a "children's sermon." This decision to include a children's sermon specifically for Stage Two children is supported by the nature of the children at this stage, their needs and their receptivity; it is also supported by the finding of developmental psychology that individuals have the capacity for relating to information and experience one level above or below their normal level of operation. In fact, we learn that progression from one level to the next (personal growth) normally occurs as individuals listen to and are intrigued by expressions of thought and behavior one level above themselves. This leads us to conclude that if the children's sermon, for instance, is properly designed at the Stage Two level, children at that stage will relate directly to the material presented, mature Stage One children will be curious to know more, and very immature children (ages 1-3) will not be interested.

In actual case study, it has been interesting for me to observe the ages of the children who respond to my invitation for the children to come forward. Even though no age is specified, the level of communication quickly dictates the age of the participation! It is also noteworthy that "participating" for children is not necessarily limited to a cognitive transaction, but is affective as well. There is good reason to believe that the very inclusion in the circle is a message to the children of God's love and his place for them in the kingdom!

### *Summary*

Thus, what I have learned from developmental psychology and confirmed in personal experience is that for the worship service to be relevant to both children and adults it cannot afford to be cast in only one stage. It must be multi-dimensional. It must strive to meet the needs of those searching for the elemental as well as those operating in the depths of profound truth. In order to do this there must be variety and intentionality: songs, stories, proclamation, and acts of praise for both the young and the mature. The combination need not be competitive. Children's songs and stories can be refreshing for adults (adults often confess to getting more out of the children's sermon!). And an "adult" time

for serious theological and personal reflection can be a welcome escape for the children as their thoughts wander into the world of fantasy. What is required is not legislation, but imagination, sensitivity, and innovation. The results can be exciting and renewing to the life of the total church!

## NOTES

1. For a more complete overview and analysis of Piaget, see: Leroy Howe, "Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development: An Overview and Appraisal," *Perkins Journal*, Vol. XXXI, No. 1 (Fall 1977).
2. For Fowler's complete essay in which he develops his whole theory of the stages of faith development, see: Jim Fowler and Sam Keen, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith* (Waco, TX: Word Books), pp. 14-101.

## THE CHILDREN'S SERMON

Let's look more closely now at what I have referred to as "the children's sermon." I hesitate even to use the term *sermon*, because of the oratorical connotation it conveys; i.e., an individual standing in a pulpit, delivering a 20-30 minute monologue. Obviously, a sermon addressed to children would have little to do with this model. I even hesitate to use the term *children's sermon* because it elicits another negative image; i.e., the typical, five-minute vignette where the preacher gathers the children at the front of the sanctuary and attempts, often with the aid of some object, to teach a lesson of profound truth.

With regard to the children's sermon, I reject both models. But I hold out for the possibility that, given a special time together, the pastor and the children can relate to each other meaningfully, and in their relating, the good news of the gospel can be conveyed. My experimentation with such a "children's time" has led me to think of the children's sermon in terms of four distinct and useful models.

Before examining each of these models and applying some criteria for "preaching" to children, however, we should be clear in our understanding as to what constitutes good preaching generally. For whatever constitutes good preaching for adults should be taken as prerequisite for good preaching to children.

In my own description of good preaching, I would list as essential factors the need for sound biblical exegesis, logical structure, and clear articulation of thoughts and images, with particular appreciation for illustrations and the use of stories. This I take to be fundamental to proclaiming the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to anyone, adults or children. It is important to remember this basic principle so that the children's sermon is never reduced in our thinking simply to the gospel in watered-down form. The task of preaching to children is neither the art of oversimplification nor the use of clever tricks. The task of preaching to children is the art of speaking the truth plainly, using concise vocabulary and clear imagery. The thesis of any children's ser-

mon ought to be sufficient to serve as the thesis of an adult sermon.<sup>1</sup> If it can't hold water, it ought to be discarded. Further, the children's sermon deserves the same adequate thought and preparation as the adult sermon. If anything, it demands *more* preparation. For just as it would be difficult to preach a twenty-minute sermon in five minutes to adults, so it is even more difficult to find the precise words and form for a brief sermon to children.

Accepting, then, these criteria for preaching generally, let us now examine the four models I suggest for preaching to children. We will apply not only these high standards but also the necessary criteria for relating effectively to children, based on our prior understanding of child development and the description of Fowler's Stage Two of faith development. And because of the present-day abundance of books of children's sermons on the market, I will, as we go along, refer to available published examples of resources to use and to avoid.

### *Storytelling*

The first model is the most common form: storytelling. Because of the strong appreciation for narrative in Stage Two, the use of story is well suited to the children's sermon. What constitutes good storytelling is a subject in itself. Without debating the issue here, let us simply say that a good story for the Stage Two child is one in which the details are specified (for example, people and places have names), the logic is straightforward, and the imagery is concrete.

Stage Two children can handle a fairly lengthy story involving a great amount of complexity if the story is told with a vivid sense of imagination. What's important is that the story "flow" naturally from beginning to end (just as the Stage Two child's own stories flow naturally; e.g., a trip to the store and back). Each part should logically follow the other (e.g., "Johnny got to the store, went to Mr. Bell, and asked if he could sell his stuffed rabbit, Fluff"). Parenthetical notes and superfluous information only confuse the children and distract their attention.<sup>2</sup>

In his essay, "Story Working" (unpublished, 1978), David Upp refers to John Dominic Crossan's book, *In the Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story*, where Crossan points to the basic structure of parable form as that in which "a setting is pictured which leads the listener to a choice which is bound up in the

prejudice of the hearers." The parable leads the listener to an obvious conclusion and then unexpectedly takes a twist, announcing instead the alternate conclusion. The listeners are caught by surprise, and the prejudice of their form of logic is revealed to them.

Because of the Stage Two child's rigid legalism and strict sense of fairness, such a storytelling technique is altogether possible and effective. I have personally experienced such success by adapting *The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard* (Matt. 20:1-16) as a children's sermon, and I can still recall vividly the protests of the children: "But that's not fair, they only worked for one hour!"

Because this technique is common to parable form, most of the parables of Jesus are easily adapted to the use of children's sermon. The Old Testament narratives of Genesis (the "J" stories) are also excellent stories for children, particularly if the preacher will take the liberty to use imagination with the text. In addition, the "stories of Jesus" from the Gospels make excellent children's stories.

Because of the Stage Two child's natural ability for role-taking, the actual or real-life story relating to the child's own questions and problems is another effective storytelling model, especially where there is a character in the story and a particular situation to which the child can relate. Martha Gray Henderson uses this technique well and is able to touch upon such common issues for children as being lost, being afraid of the dark, being different, experiencing anger, jealousy, loneliness, failure, etc.<sup>3</sup> Stories such as these can be helpful for unlocking childhood fears, fantasies, mysteries, and prejudices in a non-threatening manner, allowing for newly found coherence and order.

Fairytales, in many respects, are structured along these lines.<sup>4</sup> The fulfillment of the fantasy to boil the wicked old witch in the pot, for example, can be a therapeutic model which helps children complete the narrative in their minds and resolve the fear of enemies, both real and imagined.

The resources for stories are virtually endless. As I have indicated, Bible stories, fairytales, real-life illustrations are all possible. Often, it is just as easy to use one's imagination and conjure up an original story. In each case, one must simply accept the fact that there are no "right" stories, but that almost every story can be adapted and told in an effective way to children. The key to proclaiming the gospel through storytelling is to have a fun-

damental grasp of the gospel, to know the nature of the children, and to be imaginative and creative.

It is usually not wise to conclude the story with a moral or explanation: "And so you see, boys and girls, the lesson of the story is. . . ." Such an ending violates children's integrity to use their own sense in understanding the story. It also destroys the richness of a good story in which many points could be made and implications drawn. I prefer either to let the story reach its own end or to end with a question mark by adding simply a comment such as, "Well, boys and girls, what do you think about that?" In either case, as with any sermon, what is important is what the congregation "hears" rather than what the preacher says: what the story says to the children and how they feel about it, not what the preacher might like them to think and feel.

### *Object Lesson*

The second model for children's sermons is the object lesson. In this model an object is used to illustrate a point, to make the point concrete, or to give the child a frame of reference. Some examples of object lessons include Harvey and Patsy Moore's "Contradiction"<sup>5</sup> in which the preacher tells the children about going on a diet while at the same time eating a candy bar. Another from the same book is "I Just Can't Decide,"<sup>6</sup> where the preacher vacillates between eating or not eating an apple so long that the apple becomes rotten and the decision is made by default. And still another is their object lesson entitled "Time in a Box,"<sup>7</sup> where the question is raised, If you can't put your time in a box and save it, where can you put it? Answer: Put it to use or lose it!

The difficulty with the object lesson is the tendency for the object to become the source of an analogy. As we have previously noted, analogy involves the use of formal operations, and formal operations are beyond the cognitive ability for most Stage Two children. A good illustration of this tendency is the Moores' first object lesson of the book, "A Change in Degree."<sup>8</sup> In this object lesson the comparison is made between thermometers and thermostats; the former merely reporting the temperature, the latter effecting change. The "thermostat people" who effect change in the world are the people Jesus calls

"the salt of the earth," and it is their presence which "makes all the difference." Clearly we can see that though the comparison of thermometers to thermostats uses concrete operations, the shift from thermostats to people who are "salt of the earth" involves a more difficult logical process.

A rule of thumb for an effective object lesson: If you would have to explain the relation of the object to the lesson, or use the object as an analogy, don't try it. The chances for successful communication and effective proclamation are slim.

### *The Experiential Sermon*

A third model for the children's sermon is what I call the experiential sermon. It allows the children to discover the lesson by doing rather than by being told. It embodies a little saying I snipped out of a church newsletter:

"Tell me and I forget,  
Teach me and I remember,  
Involve me and I learn."

Examples of experiential sermons include, "How Strong Are You?". Here, individual children are asked individually to push the grand piano. Even though it is on rollers they can't make it budge. After repeated attempts, several are asked to try together. The job is easy. No one has to tell them they are stronger than they think when they work together. A variation on the same theme is "Tug of War," placing equal numbers of children on opposite sides of the piano and having them push against each other. Their efforts cancel each other. Movement takes place only when they join forces (a house divided?).

Another example is "The Tower of Babel" where the children are divided into two teams and race to build domino skyscrapers. Invariably, one will get into a conflict over the design or who gets to place the next domino, and the other team, working together with common purpose, will win.

I have preached the "Parable of the Lost Sheep" (Luke 15:1-5) to the children by letting them find hiding places in the sanctuary. Once in place they are found one by one by the caring "Shepherd." When found they return to the front of the sanctuary to await the others. When all but one are back in the fold, I pretend not to be able to find the last sheep, and suggest that,

because of limited time, we must stop the game. Wherever I have used this the children shout something like "You can't give up until the last one is found!" which is precisely the message of the parable!

Other experiential sermons include "Leading the Blind," where the children are blindfolded and upon discovering a helping hand extended within their reach, realize that we often need the guidance of others.

Still another is "Missing Puzzle Pieces," where a puzzle is dumped on the floor for the children to put together, only there is one piece missing! No matter how well the others fit together to form a beautiful scene, the picture is incomplete. Every piece, no matter how large or small, is important—and the children know it!

### *The Dialogue Sermon*

The fourth model of the children's sermon is what I call the dialogue model. Here the preacher simply serves as an enabler, allowing the children to enter into dialogue with him or her and each other on a given topic (e.g., signs of the changing seasons; unusual events such as a storm, a death, a birth, a baptism, the Eucharist, holidays; or particular questions or problems relating to children). The children are encouraged to tell their own stories, to express their own feelings, without a particular point to be made or lesson to be learned. The assumption is that children's feelings are no less important than anyone else's, and they, like their parents, need to be heard. In this manner, the child is affirmed unconditionally as an important member of the family of faith, and the message of God's love is conveyed as much by the medium as the message.

### *The Medium as the Message*

Pressing this point a step further, the manner in which the preacher relates to the children is of utmost importance. Because of the position of authority the preacher holds in the child's mind, and because of the sheer difference in size, children will naturally be somewhat reluctant to feel completely at ease. If the preacher is overbearing, dogmatic, or insensitive, the children will "hear" a condescending message, regardless of what is actually said.

An excellent resource for learning useful techniques and developing a relaxed style for relating to children is the television program, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," aired on the Public Broadcasting Network. In my estimation, Fred Rogers most nearly embodies the ideal for relating to children.

In addition to his style of communicating with children, Mr. Rogers employs a very useful tool in his show, puppets. The use of puppets is an ancient art form and can be traced not only to early drama, but to liturgy and sacred rituals. Puppets can be as simple as a sock or knit cap stretched over the fingers and as elaborate as trick marionettes. Even in their simplest forms, puppets have an amazing fascination for children and can bridge the gap between adult and child as effectively as any medium I know. The use of mime, both in the forms of clowns and liturgical dance, is another effective tool for relating to children through the models of the children's sermon we have described.

Since beginning my experiments with the children's sermon, I have intuitively found myself sitting with the children on their level (usually the floor) and gathering them around me as closely as comfortably possible. I strongly recommend this setting. Children communicate as much by touch and closeness as by sight and sound. I've had professional educators in my congregation tell me that they felt the setting of the children's time was as important as the message. The fact that almost every child is within arm's reach conveys a special feeling of acceptance and love.

Reinforcing this theory, a mother of a three-year-old in our congregation shared with me a conversation which took place at the dinner table one Sunday after church. The subject of going to church came up, and the mother asked her daughter if she liked to go to church. The little girl said she did, and the mother asked, more specifically, "Can you tell me what you liked about church?" The little girl looked up at her mother and said innocently, "What I like about church is that it is where I get to sit in the circle."

### *Learning the Way*

The four children's sermon models I propose are the result of a long process of experimentation which began in 1975 while serving a small, rural congregation in North Texas. The early days of this experimentation process were largely trial and error attempts based on intuition. For example, I sensed the fact that

children learn better by doing than by being told what to do. Hence, most of the early children's sermons were experiential. But I soon discovered that my creativity for meaningful experiential sermons was limited, and I found, by observing the children's responses, that after several Sundays in succession the effectiveness of the experiential sermon decreases. As a result, I intuitively reached for other models such as storytelling and the object lesson.

It didn't take long in storytelling to determine the need for brevity, concrete imagery, and clarity, and happily I was pleased to find that the necessary skills of imagination and animation were quickly developed. Likewise, in using the object lesson I immediately sensed the inability of the younger children to learn by analogy, and I was soon able to detect when the object was integral to the lesson and when it was merely a prop.

The most surprising discovery came when, in response to unforeseen events in the life of the community, I had the good sense to dispense with the prepared children's sermon and enter into dialogue with the children to allow them to express their own feelings about the issue at hand. In fact, on more than one occasion the children's need to express thoughts and vent emotions was so immediate that they entered into dialogue in spite of my stubborn attempts to proceed with the prepared sermon! A case in point was the birth of a baby to one of the families in the congregation. The newly declared "big brother" present at the children's time was not to be denied his chance to share this celebration with his community of faith. I couldn't get a word in edgewise, and rightly so.

It is because these models grew out of experience that I commend them with confidence. They are more of a description of what has transpired than a prescription for what might work. And, as I have tried honestly to confess, the secret of success is not in adhering to the models, but in the thoughtful preparation of a word of grace. Even then there is a high risk factor, but the unpredictability of it all is half the fun of doing children's sermons.

One children's sermon that ended in disaster had to do with the nature of prayer. Using a telephone, I told the children that praying to God was like talking to a friend on the telephone. (I should have known by the use of analogy that we were headed for trouble.) I then asked if anyone in the circle would like to try. "Just pick up the receiver and say whatever you like," I said,

hoping that one of the older children would respond. A young three-year-old volunteered. I couldn't say no, so I set the phone in front of her, and she picked up the receiver, dialed a few numbers, and sat there in silence. Finally, I said, somewhat impatiently, "Well, don't you want to say something?" The little girl smiled sweetly and replied just loud enough to be heard all the way to the back of the church, "There's no one at home."

Since ours is a small church with a very informal setting and because there is the frequent objection to calling the children out of the congregation, possibly disrupting the flow of the worship service and placing them in an undesirable spotlight, I was encouraged to experiment with a model of simply addressing a particular part of the service (e.g., the scripture lesson told in story form) to the children. I tried this on several occasions. I asked the children to sit on the edge of their seats and listen very carefully. The results were that the older children and the children closest to the front (in most instances, the same children) seemed to be attentive through the whole story, whereas the younger children and the ones sitting in the middle to the back of the congregation either did not comply or quickly lost interest. Children need the intimacy of a close setting; sitting within arm's reach of the pastor may be more important in conveying the love and acceptance of God as telling the story from a distance of Jesus' holding a child in his arms.

My method of inviting the children to come forward for the children's time was intentionally to omit any reference to a particular age, yet the content and level of communication seemed to define the age range of the group. My earlier conclusion was that as the children mature into Stage Three (Fowler) they lose interest in the children's time and become bored with material which they find no longer challenging. My later observations suggest that although children do cease to participate as they approach adolescence, their reason for dropping out may be more socially oriented than cognitive or affective. The objection that "it's baby stuff" probably indicates a need for peer approval rather than a lack of interest in the children's time. My hunch now is that even though the older children remain in their seats during the children's time they continue to listen with keen interest, and on occasion I have had a youth member comment on the children's time in such a way as to confirm my suspicion.

The latest development in my use of the children's time has been the freedom I have felt not to include it in every worship

service. In the last few months I have seldom planned a children's time on the Sundays we have had Communion. My omission was not that intentional at first, it simply seemed to me that the children's needs were met by their inclusion at the Lord's Table. I have consistently omitted the children's time in special services such as the Christmas Eve candlelight service, the Ash Wednesday service, the Maundy Thursday service, the Tenebrae service, and the All Saints Day service.

Recently I heard Hoyt Hickman, Assistant General Secretary, Section on Worship, Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church speak on the subject of worship and the children's sermon. Dr. Hickman expressed the opinion that though the children's sermon has served a useful purpose in causing the church to take seriously the place of children in worship, it probably will be a temporary catalyst in the transition from overly staid forms of worship to more lively participative forms of worship in which the children will enjoy a place of inclusion and involvement.

I tend to agree in theory with Dr. Hickman. In this context I am willing to understand the children's sermon as necessary due largely to the ineffectiveness of our modern worship services. And with Hickman and others I can look forward to the day when the average worship service is indeed inclusive and relative for all people. Until that day, however, I must hold on to the realities of the present and confess that if it were not for the children's time most of our children would go home spiritually un-nourished, not having heard a word of grace proclaiming their salvation. Thus, I am convinced that our work must continue, our experimentation must go on.

The four models I have suggested are by no means the only means of preaching to children. But I hope they will serve as vehicles for the developing of effective sermons for children. Perhaps they will serve as catalysts for creating entirely new models of children's sermons. What is important is not the model of the sermon or the style of the preacher, but the proclamation of God's love. Thus, this word of grace to anyone striving to preach to children: Children intuitively seem to know when they are loved. If the motivation of the preacher is love, then in spite of any awkwardness of style or occasional stumbling in the sermon, somehow the children will get the Word. The message will be conveyed!

## NOTES

1. This test of interchange is highly recommended. In fact, on many occasions I have found it beneficial to base the children's sermon on the same text as the sermon to the adults. In this way the children can legitimately know they are getting the same Word as the adults, and as a bonus, the children's sermon often serves as a useful illustration for the adults.
2. As a whole, Lawrence Johnson's books, *The Squirrel's Bank Account* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) and *The Mouse's Tale* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978) violate this rule to the extreme.
3. Martha Gray Henderson, *Being a Kid Ain't Easy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977). Though the format of her children's stories is helpful, the reader must avoid her tendency to write stories which are laden with moral judgments.
4. Though I find his stories too long for use as children's sermons, the stories of John Aurelio use the fairytale structure and are quite interesting. See: John Aurelio, *Story Sunday* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). In my opinion, Aurelio commits a grave offense when in the appendix to his book he tries to "explain" his stories. I recommend reading the stories and ignoring the appendix.
5. Harvey D. and Patsie S. Moore, *The Droopy Flower Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 17.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

## THE CHILDREN AT HOLY COMMUNION

Since by definition the proclamation of the gospel is by both Word and Sacrament, it is imperative that we consider now the question of the place of children at the Eucharist.

On the surface it would seem to many that to include children at the Lord's Table is an affront to serious faith. "Why, they can't possibly understand what they are doing!" some would say. Yet, for others, to exclude the children from the sacrament of Holy Communion seems much the same as excluding them from the kingdom of God. These persons would counter the argument by saying, "Children aren't the only ones who fail to comprehend the mysteries of the Sacrament!"

### *A Historical Perspective*

The place of children at the Eucharist is by no means a recent innovation. One church historian, Eugene L. Brand, contends that infant communion was practiced in the Christian church without interruption for the first ten centuries.<sup>1</sup> According to Brand, the quarreling over infant communion began in the eleventh century. The issue centered upon the complaint that infants commonly became choked while trying to swallow the bread! This led to the accepted practice in the twelfth century of giving the infants the cup only. But in the thirteenth century a debate arose over the doctrine of concomitance. This led to a temporary practice of withholding the cup from the laity altogether, infant and adult. The debate was finally settled by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. From this council came the landmark decision that confession must precede communion and that first confession should occur at the "age of discretion." Communion, then, became related directly to confession rather than baptism, and as a result, infant communion was discontinued in any widespread manner until after the Reformation.<sup>2</sup>

Closely associated with the doctrinal dispute surrounding comitance was the historical separation between baptism by the immersing, pouring, or sprinkling of water and confirmation by the laying on of hands. Brand argues that by the twelfth century this separation had become so distinct and such an accepted practice that confirmation itself was generally regarded as a sacrament, and as a matter of record, was so declared by the Council of Florence in 1439.<sup>3</sup>

By the time of the Reformation then, the practice of infant communion had been discontinued altogether, communion was associated with confession rather than baptism, and confirmation was recognized as a sacrament in itself, and as such became the normative experience for full church membership and inclusion at the Lord's Table. According to Brand, Luther struggled with these prevailing beliefs and practices of the Roman church, ultimately denying the status of sacrament to confirmation but retaining the connection between confession and communion.<sup>4</sup> Since that time, of course, as the various denominations grew out of the Protestant Reformation, the views and practices of infant communion were re-examined, and in many cases, the founding fathers elected to return to what they considered to be the original practice of the early church.

### *Theology of the Church*

The question of children at the Eucharist for the church today is stated precisely by Brand when he asks:

"If children are full members of the household of God by virtue of baptism, why can't they join us in the family meal given for our spiritual nourishment and for the intensification of our fellowship?"<sup>5</sup>

For Brand the question is clearly rooted in ecclesiology: What is the nature of the church? His answer is that the church is a family of faith, inclusive of each of its members; thus, "if baptism, then communion."

A strikingly similar view is expressed by a United Methodist theologian, William H. Willimon.<sup>6</sup> Willimon, like Brand, stresses that to be a Christian is to be a member of the family of God. By baptism we are claimed as God's people, "adopted and incorpo-

rated into the family of God." He writes, "One does not exist as a Christian in isolation." Thus, to be a member of the family is to take one's place in family gatherings such as the common meal. Willimon states that the Lord's Supper is the mark of unity and fellowship. For children to be excluded from the table would be to break that unity. Like Brand, Willimon contends that it is inconsistent to baptize children and deny them a place at the table.

Willimon advances the case for children at the Eucharist further by raising the question of the child's ability to understand the mystery of the sacrament. True, he argues, children lack complete comprehension, but so do adults. Children do know what it means to be hungry and then to be fed, though, and they certainly know the feeling of being included. Thus, in these ways and more, children understand perfectly well in their own way the nature of the sacrament.

Willimon shares in his article a personal experience of asking a class of seven-year-old children to cut out pictures to describe their feelings about Holy Communion. He relates that most of the children selected happy pictures of people eating together, but one girl chose a picture of a boy who was crying. When asked to explain why she chose that picture, she replied, "Because that's the way I feel when I see everybody else going up for Communion but me."

I had a similar experience with my own family a few years ago. We were on vacation and visiting relatives in a small rural community. On Sunday morning we got up early to attend church together. After getting situated in the pew, my wife and I sought to orient ourselves to the service by reading over the printed bulletin. It was the first Sunday of the month, and communion was to be served. I noticed an asterisk beside the ritual of Holy Communion, and my eyes jumped to the bottom of the page where I found the following note:

"In bringing the children to the altar parents are asked to print the child's name on a card and lay it on the railing for the pastor to give the 'communion blessing' [in lieu of the elements]."

I nudged my wife and pointed to the note. She raised her eyebrows and thought for a moment. Our oldest son, then five years old, was sitting between us. He caught the drift that something was up. I pointed out the note to him and whispered, "You won't be able to take communion." He looked at me with the

most puzzled look in his eyes and then whispered back, "If I can't take it, you can't take it either."

His words hit home to me, and I felt convinced he was right: if the body and blood of our Lord is not for all, it is for none. So, at the appropriate time we all went to the front as a family and knelt at the altar where, at my indication to the minister, we were each served the elements. As we returned to our seat I sensed the firm conviction that somehow Christ was pleased.

Willimon advances another reason why children should come to the Lord's Table: Children learn by doing. Their very participation in the Eucharist enables them better to understand, incorporate, and appreciate the awesome mystery and sacredness of the sacrament. Quoting John Calvin, Willimon writes: "As far as the Lord's Supper is concerned, 'I would rather experience it than understand it.'"

### *Theology of the Sacrament*

Whereas Eugene Brand and William Willimon argue for the inclusion of children at the Eucharist from the perspective of the theology of the church, a modern-day Presbyterian theologian, David Ng, argues for children at the Eucharist from the perspective of the theology of the sacrament.<sup>7</sup> In his essay Ng outlines the six propositions of Calvin's theology of the Eucharist. He lists them as follows:

1. The Lord's Supper is a gift.
2. The gift is Jesus Christ himself.
3. The gift is given through signs.
4. The gift is given by the Holy Spirit.
5. The gift is given to all who communicate.
6. The gift evokes gratitude.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, on the basis of what he understands the sacrament to be in Calvinistic theology, Ng plainly asks, "Is there anything in these six propositions which would require that [children] be forbidden from partaking of the bread and wine?"<sup>9</sup> His conclusion is that, from Calvin's perspective, there are no theological grounds for excluding children. Therefore, there is no reason to object to their presence other than the possible contention that they are unable to "discern the body" (cf. 1 Cor. 11:29). To this possible argument Ng lists four distinct ways in which he understands children to have the capacity to "discern the body": their innate abilities to receive a gift, to participate in community, to

recall the person of Jesus, and to pledge loyalty to Jesus. Ng points out that, for Calvin, discerning the body was "an activity that went far beyond intellectual consideration."<sup>10</sup> Thus, children experience and appropriate the Eucharist in their own special ways and express their faith in their own unique symbols and language, but in no sense is this to say that their experience or expression is any less significant than that of their parents.

A good example of the unique experience and expression of children comes from the following note written by a layperson to her pastor.

Sunday I watched my four-year-old take communion. He approached the rail with a look of anticipation. The pastor dropped the bread into his little cupped hands and said, "This means God loves you." A broad grin broke out on his face. Then the cup was passed. Along with the bread, he dipped his whole hand into the grape juice. The only thing a little boy can do with a hand dripping with grape juice is to wipe it on his white pants. So he did! Later, as we were eating lunch, I asked him, "What was the best part of Communion?" His reply was simple and direct. "Jesus," he said.

### *Children and Liturgy*

A contemporary writer, Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, expresses the case for children at the Eucharist from a developmental point of view when she writes:

"Baptism as admission into the church is admission also to the table. To preach the centrality of the Eucharist while denying it to children ignores what psychologists are increasingly noting, that during the earliest years are formed the person's most profound and abiding attitudes about life. . . . There is, finally, no better way for children to be embraced by the liturgy and its community, and so by God, than for them to commune."<sup>11</sup>

From a similar liturgical viewpoint, John Westerhoff writes:

"The church cannot live with rituals that divide the generations as if they had nothing in common. We cannot afford to accept the separation of children, youth, and adults for distinctive rituals. Community is the gift of shared rituals. . . . When we

permit our rites of community to address the needs of some particular age group alone, everyone suffers. The norm for the church's community rite is the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, which by its very nature, is inclusive of all.”<sup>12</sup>

But beyond all that can be said regarding the theology of the church, the nature of the sacrament, the understanding of child development, or the function of liturgy, William Willimon states the case for children at the Eucharist best when he shares with us his own personal story. He writes:

“Sometimes it seems as if the older I become, the less I understand about the mystery of God's loving presence in our midst. Do not ask me, adult though I may be, why God loves wayward children like us, how even so diverse a group of people as we are formed into the body of Christ, why 'when two or three are gathered together,' there he is also. . . .

But this I do know: These deep, sacred experiences came first to me when I was a little child, fruits of life begun in a loving, embracing family at home and at church. My encounters with God began first by being included in the church's worship, by being invited to the church's table, by being claimed at the church's font.

Admittedly, over the years, the meaning of these early experiences has deepened for me. But as an adult, I must never forget how they began and I must seek ways to make them available for little ones who come after me.”<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. Eugene L. Brand, "Baptism and Communion of Infants: A Lutheran View," *Worship*, Vol. 50, 1976, p. 36.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
6. William H. Willimon, *Keep Them in Their Place?* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1979).
7. David Ng, "The Case for the Lord's Supper and Children," *Austin Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XCV, No. 3 (October 1979), pp. 11-15.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
11. Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, "To Fear and Love God," *Liturgy*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (July-August 1979), p. 24.
12. Gwen Kennedy Neville and John H. Westerhoff, III, *Learning through Liturgy* (New York: Seabury, 1978), p. 103.
13. Willimon, *Keep Them in Their Place?*

## CONCLUSION

This inquiry into the place and role of children in the faith community has been one of practical theology. The question underlying our biblical, theological, historical, and pedagogical research has been constant: What impact do our findings have upon the place and role of children in the church today?

The task of practical theology is not simply to put theology into practice, though this is essential. More important, the task of practical theology is to provide the necessary counterpart to our theoretical nature so that a constant tension is preserved whereby the church's practice is critically examined by its ongoing processes of theology—while at the same time, its theology is continually being tested by close evaluation of its accepted practices. "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16, 20). Our theology is mere rhetoric until it is put into action. Correspondingly, what the church does is indicative of what the church really believes.

Thus, our journey into the world of children in the church is more than a quest for discovering what the children's place and role has been and, therefore, should be; it is nothing less than an examination of the church itself, its nature and function as the covenanted community, the people of God. And, as our beginning hypothesis suggested, we have found that it has been the very presence of children within the faith community that, throughout its history, has caused the church to take seriously the inclusive nature of its calling and the boundless limits of its mission to proclaim the good news to the ends of the earth.

And so, as our journey comes to a close, it is important for us to take stock of the impact children have upon the church simply by their presence, and to assess what benefits to the total life of the church might be gained by intentionally recognizing and affirming children in the overall composition of the church.

### *The Church*

Certainly one area greatly affected by the presence of children is that of ecclesiology. Children remind us of who we are as the church of our Lord, Jesus Christ. As stated, we believe that the church is an inclusive community, as evidenced by Jesus' acceptance of the sinner, the outcast, the infirm, the Samaritan, and by the early church's conscious inclusion of the Gentile. Thus, to take seriously the children in our midst and to conceive of them as partners in faith and co-heirs of God's kingdom is to be confronted with the fact that God's love and mercy is especially bestowed upon the poor and the powerless.

Often I hear adults in the church say something like, "Children are important because they are the church of tomorrow." I could not agree more. Children are the church of tomorrow. But so are we adults, if we live long enough! Children are also the church of today! Unconsciously, this common thought that children are the church of tomorrow consigns the role of children to the future and denies their inclusion in the present. Such thinking softens the affront that God accepts us not because we are righteous, not because we have sufficient faith and understanding, not because we are capable of accomplishing great goals for his glory, but simply because he chooses to accept us. God accepts us as children, youth, and adults, regardless of whether we may be physically fit or impaired, mentally alert or retarded, emotionally stable or neurotic.

This is why the crucial issue regarding the place and role of children in the faith community is the worship setting. It is one thing to provide for the needs of children in church school classes where they can be told of God's love and acceptance, but it is something quite different actually to feel their impact upon the total congregation. Having the children confined to a separate setting, as happens with a structure where worship and church school are scheduled concurrently, or where there is a "Children's Church" for all children, can be a convenient way for the adults not to deal with the reality that the kingdom of God is inclusive of children. Like the early disciples, for some reason we tend to think Jesus might be offended by the children and their sometimes unruly presence, and we offer to send them away. When we do, we are likely to be as astonished as they to find Christ calling the children, embracing them, and imploring us to become more like them!

John Westerhoff describes the inclusive church in this way:

"The Church is the family of God, a visible, historical, human community called to nurture its people in the Gospel tradition so that they might live under the judgment and inspiration of the Gospel to the end that God's will is done and God's community comes. . . . It is one church, a paradox to the mind; sinful, yet holy; divided, yet one . . . a mystery even to itself, but aware, in often incomprehensible ways, that it has a mission in the world and a ministry to those who by birth or decision find themselves, not entirely by choice, within that family which bears the name Christian."<sup>1</sup>

I like the way Westerhoff says, "to those who by birth or decision. . . ." As we have seen quite clearly, the implications of our Augustinian doctrine of grace make it impossible for us to impose any necessary criteria on our part to being the recipients of God's love. We understand God's love to be given unconditionally, so that we begin receiving the fruits of God's love even before birth in the nurturing waters of the womb, and we continue receiving this love throughout our lifetimes through the loving care of parents, teachers, pastors, spouses, and children. Thus, whereas we strive to grow in the understanding and appreciation of divine love, and as we do we are capable of responding more and more faithfully to God's gracious initiative, we always maintain that this love does not change; it is present and abundant from beginning to end.

The church's problem is that often, in responding to God's love, we have forced a decision between Christian nurture and conversion. I contend that this is a false dichotomy. I propose a better way to understand the human response: Those children reared with the growing knowledge of God's love will correspondingly grow in response to that love, thus reflecting that love in their lives as they mature. And those children who are reared outside of the knowledge of God's love will, if evangelization is effective, one day awaken to the reality of God's love; and in all likelihood, this awakening will be rather startling, perhaps traumatic, and the effects of this conversion will likely be obvious and even dramatic. But conceived in this way there is not the necessity to choose between nurture or conversion; rather, we can be assured that God's love is constant, his grace prevalent, so that our response is an indication of our accepting his love, but never a condition to his accepting us as his children.

And here again, it is the children's presence which challenges us to put our faith into action. It requires much humility on the part of us adults to accept the fact that the children's contributions are as important as our own, that their prayers are as significant, that their place in the pew and at the Lord's Table is essential to the wholeness of the community. Two illustrations come to mind. One is a little boy in our church whom I have watched faithfully put his nickel in the offering basket each Sunday. I happened to learn one day that his parents give him an allowance of fifty cents per week. According to my calculations, his contribution is roughly twice that of my own!

Another example of the typically unconscious arrogance of adults came at the dinner table in our home. As a matter of course we usually recite the children's blessing together which goes, "God is great, God is good. . . ." One day, following church, we had a minister and his wife as our guests. When everyone was seated, our oldest son asked, "Are we going to say the blessing together?" Immediately I responded, "No, I'm going to offer a real prayer today." No sooner were the words spoken than I realized what I had said. As if their prayer were not real! I cringed and quickly sought to recover, ". . . So let's all bow our heads and pray together, God is great, God is good . . .!"

Recognizing the value of the children's contributions to the church's worship, I encourage children to make banners for the sanctuary, to write litanies for the worship, to offer prayers, and to speak up at the time in the service where we share our "concerns and celebrations." So often children are able to say so concisely what we adults can find neither the words nor the courage to say.

### *Preaching*

And if the children are essential to the church's understanding of itself, they are at least a positive factor in preaching. Bushnell's words, cited earlier, put the case so well, "We do not preach well to adults because we do not learn how to preach to children."<sup>2</sup> No wonder adults get more out of the children's sermon! We preachers should learn the lesson: If you want to communicate to adults, first make yourself understood to children.

I have found that the presence of children in the congregation and the consistent use of a children's sermon greatly contributes to the improvement of preaching. One contribution is the de-

mand for clarity. What is the point? Can you state it in concise and simple terms? If you can, you can always elaborate and refine it; if you can't, you probably are not sure of what you are talking about to begin with. I mentioned earlier the test of interchange. Take the thesis of the adult sermon and preach it to the children; take the children's sermon and expand it for adults. Either way, both sermons will improve. It's hard to do a "snow job" on children. If they don't know what you are talking about, they will either say so or find something else to occupy their attention.

The practice of preaching to children not only makes us better preachers, it helps us to be clearer about what preaching really is. Who determined that a sermon should be twenty minutes long? Where does the Bible say that a sermon should consist of "three points and a poem"? How did preaching get to be the sophisticated oration that it so often is today? The "sermons" of Jesus would hardly be acceptable in most modern pulpits. Yet we take the form of what we hear Sunday after Sunday and somehow think of it as sacred!

Preaching to children calls us to examine how we preach to adults. What is preaching anyway, but the proclamation of Good News? If the preacher can proclaim the Good News in ten minutes, is it less important than if it took twenty minutes? If he or she can proclaim Good News by the use of a story, dialogue, or experience, is it any less valid than a theological treatise?

I don't mean to sound irreligious, but sometimes I think we take preaching too seriously. At least we take ourselves as preachers too seriously. We forget that the Word is proclaimed by the Spirit, not by us. We forget that the miracle of preaching is that through our words others come to hear God's Word. We must always remember that our words and His Word are not precisely the same.

So I encourage preachers to venture beyond the twenty-minute monologue and explore the possibilities of preaching in new forms. Step out of the pulpit from time to time, throw away the manuscript on occasion, tell a story, share a personal experience, engage the congregation in an exercise or dialogue, and trust that though the form may be novel, the Word can still be conveyed. And if the children get the point, you can be assured the adults will, too!

## Community

Finally, there is much to say about the contributions of children to the *koinonia*, the fellowship of the church. It is our fallacy as adults to think only of our ministry to the children. We must also be aware of the ministry of children. I confess even in the writing of this manuscript that I have resorted to the old phrases of "preaching to children," and "relating the gospel to them." As if the children had nothing to offer the adults! I trust that the reader can see by the many examples I have used that I have a profound appreciation for the contributions children offer. In their book, *The Ministry of the Child*,<sup>3</sup> Dennis Benson and Stan Stewart help us open our eyes to the marvelous gifts children bring to the church when given an opportunity. Their book contains many examples and stories of children's contributions to the faith community, and I heartily recommend it.

In the church I presently serve, the children are extremely numerous and visibly present. This is a problem at times, for with such a large proportion of children, up to one third of the congregation at times, the order and continuity are difficult to maintain. At times the adults become weary and impatient, and we have to reassess what is happening. Sometimes we have to remind the children of their responsibility to respect the needs of the adults, and they are more than willing to comply. But through the hassles I generally notice almost every week small gestures of love being shared among the children and the adults. Sometimes an adult will slip a note or a treat to a child. As often, a child will present a chosen adult with a note, a picture, or an object made in Sunday school class. Such small yet significant acts are, to me, the essence of what the church is about.

One Christmas season our two oldest children, then eight and six years old, wanted to sell Christmas cards. When their door-to-door efforts were nearly exhausted and several boxes were left, one of them hit upon the idea that they could save time by telephoning selected clients. I found it interesting to note that each of them picked first on their list an adult friend from church. One called a prominent judge, the other called an engineer. Both related their message without pretense or apology. Needless to say, the adults felt a great sense of honor at having been chosen.

In the study of Transactional Analysis, we learn that each person has three primary modes of being, or "ego states": the parent, adult, and child. The child within us is sometimes rebellious,

sometimes adaptive, and sometimes playful. What we have discovered through our interaction with children both at home and at church is that the children help the adults rediscover their "playful child" nature. Adults can be stuffy, serious, and distant. But children can, if given the chance, transform that stuffiness into creativity, turn the seriousness into laughter, and replace the distance with intimacy.

We had a Christmas Eve Candlelight Service at a church I formerly served. It was one of those elaborately planned, highly coordinated, and overly formal services when all did their best to act properly. Unexpectedly, though, a cat walked in during the singing of the first hymn and created quite a stir before finally being ushered out. Then a baby who was asleep on the floor awoke during the prayer, crawled under three pews before her absence was noticed, and grabbed an elderly man by the leg, which naturally elicited quite a vocal response from him! There was little else for the congregation to do by this time but to accept the turn of events with humor and let out with a hearty roar of laughter. Oddly enough, after we sang, "Joy to the World," and made our exit, everyone seemed to agree that it had been one of the best services we had ever experienced!

An interesting aspect of American society is that adults are often reluctant to touch. A handshake is about the limit for most. But children have few inhibitions. Touching is for them a natural way of self-expression, and it is an important way they have of concretizing relationships. Where children are actively present, adults seem more willing to risk themselves to physical contact. Holding hands in a circle is common. And a gentle hug or warm embrace is acceptable. My feeling about this is that the Transactional Analysis theorists are correct: Deep down inside each of us is a small child who desperately wants to feel the freedom to sing, dance, giggle, touch, play, and be loved. If adults are receptive to the children in their midst, they too can discover how to be a child once again.

### *Summary*

It would be both idealistic and naive to suggest that all we need to do in our local churches is to open the Sunday school doors and flood the sanctuary with children and the worship will be complete. There is no denying the fact that we have certain expectations of what constitutes proper behavior in worship. Some

of our expectations may be unrealistic, some may be heretical—but not all. If worship is to be taken seriously, a certain degree of respect is demanded. One of our tasks is to determine what constitutes proper behavior in worship, what constitutes a disruption to worship, and where the line should be drawn between seriousness and false piety. Whatever we decide along these lines, we will then need to take careful and deliberate steps to convey this to the children. A degree of conditioning and behavior modification will undoubtedly be necessary. But children very much want to please; they seek approval. Given a clear and realistic set of expectations and a little time and patience, the children can and will gladly conform.

Second, there is the question of comprehension. We want our children to grow in the knowledge of the faith. We want the faith eventually to be a source of strength and life to them. We want them in time to be able to impart the faith to their children and others. We will not be content to have our children think of baptism simply as sprinkling and the Lord's Supper only as grape juice and cracker time. We want them to know and to be able to appropriate the articles of faith in their lives, and we want them to have at the source of their being the life and teachings of Jesus. But again, we trust that children want to know more. The faith is not some alien set of rules and regulations which must be force-fed, but an understanding of life that gives meaning and purpose to everyday experiences. Children are curious creatures, and given a chance they seek to explore, discover, and assimilate their environment into a meaningful whole. If Jesus is to them now only a peculiar man with a beard, that's all right. We can trust that in time he will become to them a friend, and ultimately their Lord and Savior. The challenge for us is not to get children to learn, but to keep up with their pace!

Finally, there is the reality of human nature. Human life is a dynamic and often unpredictable process, and in this regard children are no different from adults. As much as we may like to think that their behavior is manageable and their understanding accountable, we recognize that children are constantly subject to relapse, reversion, digression, distraction, and internal conflicts relating to self-identity, sibling rivalry, peer pressure, quarrelling parents, socialization, etc. Thus, just when we think we have clearly determined the children's place and role in worship, we find that there is as much evidence to the contrary as to the support of our conclusions!

This leads us to the close of our journey which, in a sense, is not a close at all, but merely a stopping point. For whereas we firmly believe that the church is, by definition, inclusive of children, and whereas we have found that the active involvement of children continually helps the church to define and shape itself, we are willing to say that the precise manner in which children are best served by the church's worship is subject to continued experimentation and dialogue. In some cases a children's sermon may not be preferred. On some occasions a separate children's liturgy may be best. As with any aspect of faith and practice, there can be no hard and fast rules. But there can be, and there should be, always the faithfulness of adults to honor the place of children as a chosen part of the people of God and to respect them as an integral part of the family of faith—so that as adults we understand ourselves not as patrons, but as partners of the children, seeking together the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

#### NOTES

1. Gwen Kennedy Neville and John H. Westerhoff, III, *Learning through Liturgy* (New York: Seabury, 1978), p. 92.
2. Randolph Crump Miller, "Horace Bushnell: Prophet to America's Children," *Perkins Journal*, Vol. XXXII, No. 3 (Spring 1979).
3. Dennis C. Benson and Stan J. Steward, *The Ministry of the Child* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

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